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THE WATCHTOWER
Bill Spencer

NO RETURN
George Whitley

STILL TIME
David Porter

ALIEN FOR HIRE
Larry Maddock

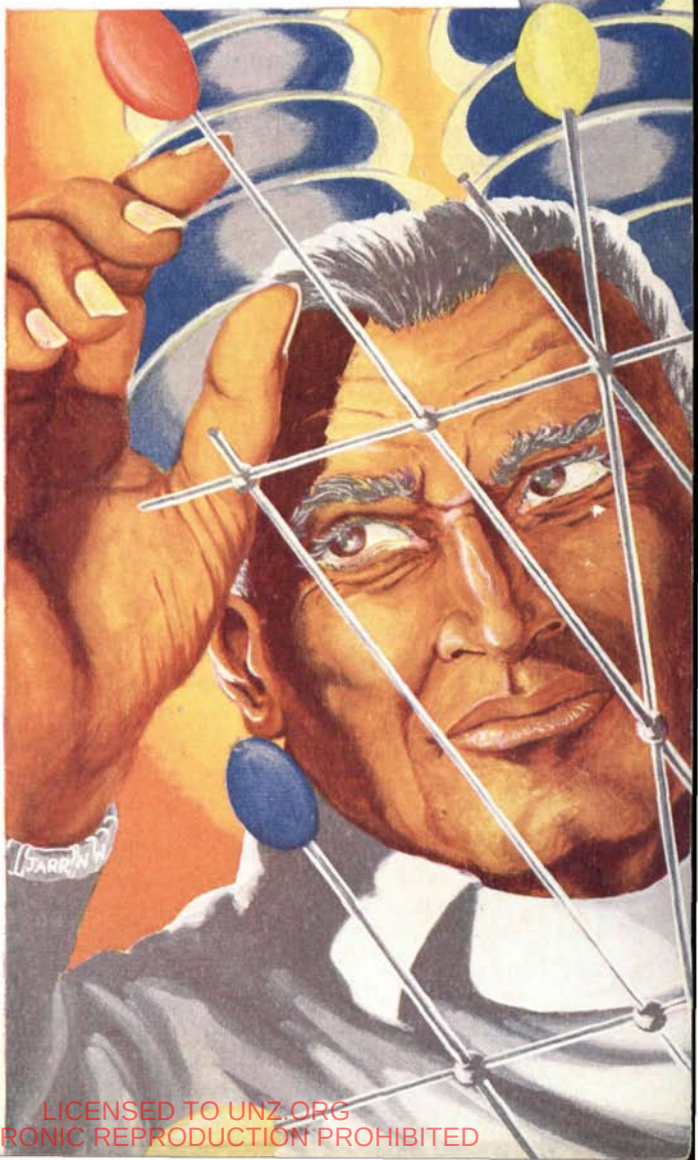
THE FUNNEL
Harold Parsons

Serial

THE FATAL FIRE
Part Two
Kenneth Bulmer

Features

14th Year
of Publication



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Kenneth Bulmer

London

The most important thing that has happened to me since my last profile in New Worlds is the advent — the volcanic, catastrophic, endearing, sheerly time-consuming irruption — into my life of a daughter.

"The Fatal Fire" was written before Deborah Louise appeared on the scene. Looking back beyond that to the remarks about "The Patient Dark" that I made when that story was serialised in New Worlds, I would place "The Fatal Fire" more into the category of a novel than a serial. The other remarks still hold true, however, and some of the results of the recent poll mentioned by Editor John Carnell in the editorial in New Worlds 96 bear this out. I might add here, in parenthesis, that I have never wholly subscribed to the belief that the short story is the be all and end all of science fiction.

For a mood piece; for a sudden, stimulating shock of wonder; the short story form is probably supreme. But for the logical extrapolation and development of ideas, the greater scope of the novel cannot be challenged.

In "The Fatal Fire" two trends have been followed up, with others, to provide the background bones against which the story moves. A short story might have done justice to one skein, scarcely both; although part of the background is traceable back to one of my earlier shorts.

This story gave me a particular pleasure in the writing, a pleasure which I hope comes over in the reading. I hope that the points I try to make and what I have to say matches up to that pleasure.

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TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

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Big Book . . .

1959 wasn't exactly a vintage year for the science fiction novel, in fact a very mediocre five have been placed on the short list for a possible Hugo Award at this year's 18th World S-F Convention which will be held at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in September. One of those five, however, is the Big Book of last year. Big not in size or price but controversially. It is Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* (Putnam, New York) and I mention it this month because it seems very unlikely the book will ever be published in Great Britain.

This assumption is based on the fact that of 25 Heinlein novels written so far only four have appeared here as books and one as a paperback. For some unknown reason British publishers have not been overly enthusiastic about the works of the one American novelist termed more often than any other as the leading science fiction writer of our age.

His latest novel will not endear him to many of them, particularly in view of the fact that it has a future war theme—and this at a time when disarmament talks break down, spy-flights have wrecked Summit talks, and the cold war has hotted up globally. But the war theme is some thousands of years in the future, and has nothing to do with present-day politics. What then is the controversy about?

Dedicated to " all sergeants anywhere who have laboured to make men out of boys " it apparently glorifies war and contains philosophies which just might contaminate the minds of younger readers, inasmuch as somewhere along the line it was quoted as a " juvenile " although there is no such mention anywhere in the book. Hence reviewers and critics in USA were split right down the middle over the subject matter. Bearing in mind that all Heinlein's previous novels from Scribner's had been *listed* as juveniles (although they had been designed for both an adult and a teenage readership) it is logical to suppose that this one would also fit the same category. The change of publisher infers that this was the option novel Scribner's found too hot to handle and let get away.

A lot depends upon the individual reader's mental approach to any war book as to his final reaction after reading it. If you have read Norman Mailer's *The Naked And The Dead* you have the pattern Heinlein has set for the glorification of the *professional soldier* (not for war as a natural outlet for Man). Some

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. . . of 1959

of you may even have read the abridged version of *Starship Troopers* which appeared in *F and SF* not long ago but the shortened version does little justice to the full-length book as so much of the philosophy is missing. And it is this philosophy behind the mind of the professional soldier that is causing such heated discussions.

The book describes the training of a rookie infantryman, from ' boot camp ' right through to combat on an alien planet, with all the extrapolations of modern arms and armaments in such a future setting as Heinlein does so meticulously well. The future war scenes are probably the most vivid in current s-f literature and point out an axiom that is becoming more and more obvious—that despite the ghastliness of even our own 20th-century weapons the infantryman is *still* going to be the final ' weapon ' for taking control of conquered territory. Of little use ' dusting off ' or atom bombing enemy country if the invader cannot put his own troops on such soil and make use of it. Such is Heinlein's basic plot in the invasion of another planet—and it will be as logical in the distant future as it is today.

Apart from the philosophy contained in the book the actual combat scenes are tremendously thrilling, alien yet understandable, as the infantry are dropped on a far-distant planet to create havoc in a city in as short a time as possible and then regroup to be taken off by a small scout ship. There is the inevitable heroics—the wounded comrade who must be saved —but this is done unthinkingly as so often happens during the heat of battle. Tactically and strategically, Heinlein has evolved some fine methods of future warfare, and the book is fast-paced throughout even during the training periods.

The major point most of the critics seem to miss in the book —and a factor that points it up as being dedicated to the professional soldier rather than a general book advocating war—is the fact that only a small percentage of trained men finally come through the training period and are posted fit for combat duties. Of a regiment of 2009 who volunteered for such training only 187 finally pass out as professional soldiers and it is their life we follow through the final stages of the book. The rest fell by the wayside and were returned to civilian life. The rigours of training were too much for them.

Continued on Page 128

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New author Bill Spencer makes an interesting approach to the 'messages from outer space' theme. This idea has been in the news several times recently with proposals for building equipment to try and discover extra-Solar intelligent radio signals.

THE WATCHTOWER

by BILL SPENCER

The big rotorcar swung down to the landing apron with a rumble of muted engines. Jon Mitland waited for it to touch down, then pushed forward the trolley on which Trancer was lying. The sick man stirred uneasily. Trancer's wife, Ilsa, fussed over him, tucking the bedclothes round him, talking to him softly.

A door cracked open. As they pushed Trancer forward under the idling rotors, the pilot got down to help them. Leaving an empty cabin.

The pilot was alone . . .

" Hey, where's our replacement ?" shouted Jon. There was an edge of anger in his voice.

" Replacement ? None available," the pilot snapped back.

" But that's impossible . . ."

" Control was definite. Nobody can be spared to replace Trancer. You two will have to carry on alone."

Jon looked at Ilsa. She was giving her sick husband a little kiss on the cheek. " I'll radio every day," she kept saying. Trancer was too ill to hear, or care.

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They got a light metal ramp in position and trundled him aboard the rotorcar. Jon noticed the cluster of long distance fuel tanks strapped to the fuselage. It was all of 1,500 miles back to base.

The pilot wasted no time. He was in his seat now, revving up the engines.

As they moved back out of the downwash of the rotors Ilsa's pale blonde hair curled in the slipstream. They watched the ungainly craft rise out of the clearing, and swing round on to course. It paused for only a second before streaking away around the jungle-clad hump of the nearest mountain.

It was a relief to get back into the air-conditioned watchtower. They went into the clear plastic column and were lifted swiftly up on a pneumatic platform into the flexi-glass bubble.

Once inside, they were no longer conscious of the steamy claustrophobia of the surrounding jungle.

A complex system of shining louvres spanned across inside the bubble, enabling direct sunlight to be shut out. It was cool and pleasant inside.

Ilsa checked the recording instruments. Scores of slender styli drew wiggles of coloured ink across the recording scrolls as they imperceptibly crawled off one reel and onto another. Insignificant squiggles.

" Nothing," she said, her voice without inflection of surprise or disappointment.

It was like that day after day. Month after month.

The Watchtower was based on the usual pattern. When you'd seen one you'd seen them all—whether they were sited in jungle, desert or icy tundra. They were spaced in a precise grid system across the entire surface of the globe.

Nowadays, of course, the Watchtowers were utterly pointless.

No spewing burst of radioactivity had been recorded for over a generation. Why should anyone wish to dabble with death, when the System provided for every physical and mental need ?

Nevertheless the Watchtowers were part of the System—and so they had to be maintained, till doomsday if need be.

A green light flashed, and an audio sounded with subdued note. Ilsa glanced at the clock.

" Ready for lunch ?" she asked.

Jon tried to sound enthusiastic. Eating was one of the few remaining distractions.

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They walked through into the living quarters, which were divided up into a series of polygonal rooms by walls of opaque or translucent plastic.

" Two more hours and Dig will have reached base. Then we can radio through for the medical report."

" Let's hope it's nothing serious," said Ilsa, sitting down gracefully at the amethystine table.

" He'll be all right. Should be back in a couple of days."

Jon pressed a button, and from a console at the end of the table appeared two goblets of iced fruit juice.

" Cheers," said Ilsa.

Their eyes met across the narrow table.

Jon was conscious of her smoothly perfect face, of her large jewel-like eyes, looking at him yet not looking. Watching, relaxed, feline . . .

Anticipatory ?

He felt suddenly a hot wave of embarrassment, and looked away.

" Cheers," he mumbled into his glass.

The twin suns shuddered ominously as they swung round on their common axis.

An angry ocean of radiance blistered out from them—searing, menacing.

Thirteen shrunken planets circled the binary star. On the outermost, Kurag, intelligent life was still clinging to survival.

Now, the small red sun was eclipsed by the larger blue one. It was time for the meeting.

Deep below the planet's surface, buried under many layers of blue crystal and flashing metal and translucent rock, the inhabitants of Kurag moved slowly through the caverns and corridors.

They rolled along, in the subdued blue glow that filtered down from above—a hundred, a thousand, a million globes of intelligent pulsating light. Small hurrying thoughts chased each other, gleaming, swelling and subsiding, in the pearly centre of each lucid sphere.

Then, as they entered the central cavern, each shining individual became quiet, as it directed its flickering mental processes to one idea.

An indefinite time passed.

Finally those beings near the centre of the concourse began deliberately to shape a stream of thought. The thought pattern spread slowly, with inexorable logic.

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Smaller, paler reflections of these thoughts appeared within each of the other spheres. A sense of the inevitable gripped the whole assembly.

Suddenly from somewhere remote from the centre came a movement of protest.

It started from a group of individuals who earlier had been remarkable for the speed and profusion of their thoughts—perhaps more sensitive or less well balanced than the rest. From this group now came a ripple of amazement turning to disgust and finally to outright nausea.

It started when the central group had projected an image of a remote planetary system, inhabited by alien creatures of very different appearance from the dwellers on Kurag.

The answering wave of protest rippled inwards until it met the slow-moving geometrical forms of a remorseless logic, and gave way before them. Swiftly, the interruption collapsed.

Now there was only the inevitable to be faced.

A starkness, a coldness almost of fear came over the assembly. But as the plan evolved, a consensus of agreement was felt throughout the vast cavern.

It is decided, then. But just as the meeting was about to break up, a novel and ingenious thought shot out across the assembly. It came from a member of the group that earlier had raised the protest.

The brilliancy of the new idea was like exploding fire, like swift streamers of burning magnesium. Those of the assembly who had moved out of their places quickly resumed them.

One of the beings at the centre of the cavern took up the new idea and turned it over. Its many facets flashed like a glittering crystal, now gold, now crimson. The image of vast time appeared. A query formed, a little negative whirlpool.

The originator of the idea showed how the enormous time lag could be overcome. *Of course.* So the idea was approved.

The blue interior of the domed cavern was momentarily lit up with a sparkle of approval. Everyone left in a mood of serene acceptance. The inevitable could not be evaded—but it could be neatly turned into the basis of an unprecedented Experiment.

Before they left, those at the centre of the cavern projected mental energy inwards, and another luminous globe was suddenly formed in their midst. To a casual glance it might have looked like one of them, but on closer inspection it

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appeared to pulsate with a stricter, less flexible rhythm. This was merely an inanimate coalescene of the decisions reached by the assembly, a congealment of the agreed plan.

When all had left, this intelligent artifact began to issue its instructions to a series of complex machines in other regions of Kurag.

"Calling Control," Jon said, sitting at the transceiver console. "What's the news on Dig Trancer?"

"The doc says he'll need deep therapy to pull him through. Treatment can't be rushed. Take at least six weeks. Maybe more."

"*What*!" Jon fought to keep the irritation out of his voice —and failed.

As always the conversation would be recorded, to be later picked over by the tame psychiatrists at Control. Well, let them go ahead and record.

"But that's fantastic," Jon went on heatedly. "We need a replacement immediately. *Immediately*, do you get that?"

The voice at the other end was level and cool.

"Sorry, Mitland, but that's just not possible. Your orders are to carry on as usual."

"All right, but don't blame me if you have another psychiatric case on your hands."

Jon stood up, cutting the conversation off abruptly.

Ilsa was near him. She came closer, and put cool hands on his shoulders.

Jon disengaged himself rather roughly, and turned aside.

"What's the matter, pate?" she asked.

Jon shrugged. "I know I'm behaving like a Minus—or worse."

Ilsa tactfully said nothing.

"But really these morons at Control have no imagination. None whatever."

"But what's the problem?" Ilsa's great big eyes were an innocent blue—blank as those of a cat about to pounce on a sparrow.

"Oh . . ." Jon, rudely, strode out of the room.

Jon was Plus-plus for stable temperament and sociability. You had to be a Plus-plus to be selected for Watchtower duty.

But the computer which had picked the team for Watchtower XP-20 had overlooked one vital contingency. Jon, Ilsa and Dig formed an ideal team as long as they were all there together

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Even the loss of Jon, or the loss of Ilsa would not have mattered at all that much. But take away Dig—and you had dynamite.

Dig and Ilsa formed a close-knit, stable unit as man and wife. Jon, who preferred a more distant relationship, was quite happy to be odd man out. But now the situation had been suddenly changed by Dig Trancer's illness. Jon was left alone with Ilsa—and it was impossible to have a distant relationship with a woman as high-powered as Ilsa.

The days went past somehow—each apparently identical with the last. They followed the ordered, unhurried ritual of the Watchtower. But just beneath the surface, enormous tension was building up. It became virtually impossible to pretend that everything was normal, and to behave unconcernedly.

Jon became ever more fiercely conscious of Ilsa's beauty, a hard metallic beauty that challenged and mocked his maleness. Simply to look at her became acutely painful.

He reacted by becoming gruffer, more unpredictable, less communicative than ever.

Ilsa was standing with her back to him, her sandalled feet at the edge of the goldfish pool which formed the centrepiece of the living room. The miniature waterfall cascading down the rocks made a tinkling sound.

She raised her exquisite shoulders in an almost inperceptible shrug. "You've never liked me, have you?" she said accusingly.

"Of course I like you, Ilsa."

"From the very first moment when we were teamed together I've sensed that you didn't really care for me."

She swung round, her eyes burning.

"Now *why* don't you like me?"

"I do, I've told you I do."

"You don't."

Jon sat down uneasily in a resilient chair.

"Naturally I'm not as close to you as Dig. He's your husband."

"So what?"

"Well, I'm just a member of the team, that's all."

Ilsa came towards him with lissom strides of her long legs. Her face was close to his. He studied the artistry with which her gold-painted eyes were made up.

"Look," she said, almost fiercely. "Look, I'm a woman and you're a man."

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Jon had no trouble in verifying the first part of the sentence.

" Well ?" he said, looking away, and trying to sound casual.

" Oh, why don't you grow up !"

Ilsa flounced away and slammed the door of her own room as noisily as the resilient plastic would allow. The door failed to latch properly, and bounced half open again.

For a long time Jon stood gaping into the pool, his thoughts spinning. The half open door implied an invitation that he couldn't quite chase out of his mind.

The interior lighting began to glow unobtrusively. It was getting dark outside. Jon decided to go for a long walk. There was an argument going on inside him : part of his mind was very angry and another part was amused. He needed a walk. A very long walk.

He clipped a search torch to his belt and—just in case—a hypodermic pistol capable of knocking out anything that moved in the jungle.

He went down the transparent lift shaft and out into the jungle, already pleasantly cool. The moon had come up and he had no difficulty in following a trail out of the clearing.

He decided to make for a ridge to the east. Never, in all their two years at Watchtower, had any of them explored over in that direction. It was easier and pleasanter to meander down the broad tracks to the beach than to face the steady pull up to the east. But now he felt eager for physical exertion, with its mixture of relaxation and stimulus.

In two hours he'd made the ridge, with no incident—beyond the appearance of an unidentified snake which had quickly slithered into the jungle without the need for him to use the pistol.

There was bare rock at the summit, clean boulders that seemed to sleep in the moonlight. He climbed up on to one of them, so as to be able to take in more of the moonlit scene that spread out below him.

Then he saw it—at first it looked like nothing more than a lightning-blasted tree, or a trick of light and shadow.

It was too far for his torch to reach, but he was sure his guess was right.

He started to move over the rocks towards it, breaking into a shin-barking, stumbling trot as he got nearer.

The giant radio telescope was a black lattice against a blue-black sky, a cold thing of alien beauty, inert, lifeless, long neglected.

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He walked slowly round the base, admiring the antique architecture. The control room and living quarters were empty and seemed to have been unoccupied for years. His torch probed the glazed surfaces. Everything was tidy and in a perfect state of preservation. Quite a find. The whole thing had been lovingly coccooned in plastic before being abandoned.

No doubt it dated from the days before the System, when scientific enquiry was still encouraged—before it was discovered that simply to amass knowledge, without regard to the effects on society of that knowledge, was harmful and unnecessary.

Still, thought Jon, it must have been exciting in those days—apart from the inevitable squalor and uncertainty—when no one knew what shattering new scientific discovery was just round the corner.

He broke through the plastic skin over the doorway. The door opened before him. He stepped on to the threshold—and automatically the interior lights of the living quarters came on. Rather abruptly—but still, they came on.

So, thought Jon. They did a good job of encapsulating this rig. The solar generators must still be working, keeping the storage cells topped up.

The air was sweet inside the entrance foyer. The air conditioning was still active, circulating dry air, keeping out the jungle miasma which would have reduced the place to a sweating mass of corrosive green slime in a matter of weeks.

Jon made for the scientific laboratory. As he went through each door, more lights glowed, until the place was alive with shining phototubes.

In the main control room, the electronic gear seemed to be in perfect order. Jon threw a switch experimentally. Relays clicked and a motor hummed somewhere. Overhead the big dish of the radio telescope started to swing slowly round. Jon stopped it by flicking the switch back to neutral.

He opened a locker and found it was full of notebooks, crammed with scientific records. He started reading a page at random. It read :

0230 ζ Herculis	0300 hrs - 2037 hrs
Tape RZ 54-K6	No significant signal

He flipped over a few pages ;

0012 ι Herculis	1425 hrs - 2359 hrs
Tape TP 17-B3	No significant signal

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It was the same all the way through. No significant signal. There was never a signal.

Since the earliest searches for interstellar communications, a series of inventions had made possible the design of ever more sensitive receiving apparatus.

Jon noted with approval the banks of tetratrons—tubes of roughly cruciform appearance. These compact, ultra-sensitive, ultra-stable multiplying devices gave an amplification ten billion times as great as that available to the first searchers.

Long years ago, a fanfare of publicity had greeted the opening of this particular radio telescope, with its vastly greater reach into space. He remembered coming across references to it in the science-history magazines—pulp magazines whose circulation was permitted as long as they treated science as an affair strictly of the past, like astrology and alchemy.

Jon found in the locker another, larger, glossily bound notebook in which the researchers had set out their aims and methods. He settled down on a comfortable couch with his feet up, and began to wade through it.

An hour later he had finished. He snapped the book shut, put it back in the locker and came out of the control room. The lights went out as he passed through each room. He closed the outermost door behind him carefully. He was alone outside again in the cool night air, alone with the moon and stars.

He started to walk slowly back to the Watchtower, mulling over what he'd discovered.

Fifty years ago the previous experimenters had abandoned their search for a message from another star. Probably they'd been recalled home when the system first came into force. Perhaps (who could say?) they'd already grown a trifle bored with the whole thing. Year after year it had been the same. Record reception. Feed record into computer. Out of the computer comes, every time, the same disheartening set of symbols. No significance.

On the other hand, no one could prove that if they'd kept up the search just one day more, they wouldn't have . . .

The thought fired across Jon's mind like a meteorite. And suddenly, he knew what he must do.

On Kurag, the luminous globe which held the decisions of the assembly now began to oscillate in a warbling, cooing symphony.

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The globe sent out a swift pattern of interlaced pulsations, and machines in every part of the planet hastened into action.

In vast assembly halls below the surface of the planet, complex machines rolled forward on their spherical tracks and began to shape immense-crystal ships.

They towered up in the halls like vast gothic spires. Through their transparent sides could be seen intricate many-coloured machinery. Thin rods and ligaments were woven together, interconnecting the bulging nuclei of what looked like a nervous system under the microscope.

When the giant space ships were ready, huge openings appeared in the roof above them. Beyond was the blue-black vault of an alien part of the cosmos. Stars glittered down with an unfriendly, icy ferocity on the thoughtful machines readying the ships for blast off.

Then from the master sphere came a pulsation of command, and fire jetted simultaneously from a thousand ships. They rose silently into the alien sky, and out towards a rendezvous in space.

They made for a zone of neutral gravity between the planets and the twin suns. Then, firing lesser jets, the ships formed themselves into three gigantic clusters. Two groups spread outwards like the raying petals of a two-headed flower—and as they went some metallic substance was sprayed from side-ports into the outer near vacuum. Magnetic fields held it in a glass-smooth, paper-thin surface until it hardened. In a comparatively short time, two vast dishes of some gossamer silvery material had been extruded in space, two gigantic spiders' webs one directed towards the suns, the other towards an indefinite point in deep space.

The two groups of ships which had formed the huge dishes now vapourised, their work done. The third group formed a cluster between these two parabolic mirrors, and shot out feelers of waxy substance, linking the construction together.

Corona discharges from the rims of the parabolas made small adjustments to their positions.

Now the parabola directed at the twin suns began to gather radiant energy and feed it into the nucleus of linked ships, which glowed perceptibly.

A number of alien beings coasted up from the planet's surface enclosed in crystalline capsules. They gathered at the focus of the parabola pointing towards deep space, and joined

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to form a crystal polygon. In some way the energy gathered from the suns was being used at this focus.

More aliens arrived at the space station. And now a strange thing began to happen. One by one they had sidled up to the compact group at the focus, and remained poised. The central group awoke from blankness and began to reproduce within themselves exactly the tremulous sequences of light and colour which originated in the individual nearby.

The process went on for several hours and then the individual seemed utterly spent. It drifted away, its globe of light became opaque and whitened. Its place near the central group was taken by another alien.

As one by one the aliens went through this process and drifted away, more came up from the planet to take their turn.

At rare intervals, one of the globes in the centre would fail and become opaque. It was ejected, slowly, almost sadly, from the focus to drift away into space. The process would halt for a while then, until another had come up specially from the planet's surface, to take the place of the dead sphere.

Jon was beginning to get results.

He looked up through the transparent roof at the great dish of the radio telescope combing the heavens, probing deep space.

The massed tetratrons of the receiving system hummed with energy. Display screens glowed, their traces, humped or angular, indicating the correct functioning of delay systems, filter networks and waveform analysers. Magnetic tape spewed out of the receiver and into the computer.

Jon busied himself happily among the gear, one eye constantly on the central display of the computer, divided by a vertical line. One side was labelled " significance." The dancing trace of the display remained obstinately on the other side, in the zone labelled " no significance."

The slightest incursion into the " significance " zone would set warning buzzers going—Jon liked to watch the trace himself, just to make doubly sure.

He managed to tear himself away, and go and brew a cup of coffee in the antique but adequate galley. He sipped it thoughtfully.

This was the twentieth day he'd been operating the radio telescope, listening for a communication from space.

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It was all going according to plan. He was continuing the systematic search programme where his predecessors had left off.

Everything was functioning perfectly. There was just one snag.

No signals.

Still, he told himself, it was too early to start getting impatient. The previous researchers had kept it up for twenty years without so much as a glimpse of a signal.

Jon put down his empty coffee cup and stood up.

He couldn't grumble—he'd been probing the ether for a mere ten days without result. Ten days, compared with the thousands of days logged in the blue notebooks.

But he couldn't deny a tiny pinprick of disappointment. He'd had a hunch, a premonition—call it what you like—that he'd only to get the rig working again in order to succeed, almost at once, where the earlier experimenters had failed.

A message from the depths of space.

What sort of a message?

Jon dragged his mind back from the cosmos, and started on the ancient ritual of washing up in the old fashioned titanium sink. He pulled the plug. And as the water gurgled in the outlet pipe and re-circulator, he walked out of the radio-telescope station.

Having first left a small transmitter in operation which would trigger a warning buzzer in his pocket if anything came through.

He got back to the Watchtower in about twenty minutes' brisk walking.

Ilsa was wearing her sheerest gown. She sat on the edge of the ornamental lakelet and dabbled her pretty gold-lacquered toes in the water. The fish didn't seem to mind.

Nor did Jon, though as they sat down to a meal it was on the tip of his tongue to point out that her gown wasn't quite the thing for a working party of scientists.

How would she react, he wondered? Slap his face? Or giggle? Giggle, probably.

Over the iced grapefruit, he thought she seemed secretly amused by something. Probably watching his discomfiture. Anyway, he had no control over her—that was obvious.

"Nice walk?" she asked suddenly.

"Um, very pleasant," Jon mumbled.

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" You should be desperately fit with all this exercise. Why don't you come down to the beach for a swim with me ?"

Jon tried to imagine the sort of bathing costume she'd wear, and gave it up. There was too little for the imagination to get hold of.

" I really prefer a walk," he said. " But of course, if you'd *like* me to come . . ."

" Oh no," Ilsa cut in quickly. " I want you to *want* to come with me, before I invite you. I'd hate to feel you were just doing it to be sociable."

She's playing with me, thought Jon. Ilsa seemed to have a particularly knowing look.

" You must see quite a bit of the island on your walks. You were gone for four hours on Monday. Five hours yesterday."

Jon let the implied question hang in mid air.

" Don't you get bored with passing the same spot for the third time round ?"

" I don't walk the whole time."

" What do you do when you're not walking ?" Ilsa was looking him straight in the eyes.

" I like to brood a bit."

" Good clean fun," said Ilsa, with the ghost of a snort.

In space near Kurag, all the beings were gone now—become opaque and drifted away. But the machines which were left were still active.

At the focus of the second reflector, another structure was taking shape. It was finished only just in time.

The twin suns for some time now had been shuddering with ominous, disruptive irregularity. Light and heat welled out of them in great life-destroying waves.

These mighty outflowings of energy were hungrily gathered by the first reflector, and stored in the central nucleus—now increased in size by a thousandfold to accommodate the vast access of power and feed it in an almost steady stream to the second reflector. This was being used to some purpose, for the weird structure at the focus was throwing off huge glowing coronas of radiant energy—a pulsating tornado of meaningful waves.

There was no doubt about it any more. Jon was getting increasingly restless at the failure of the search programme to produce anything.

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A litter of empty coffee cups strewed the control bench. He felt too apathetic to wash up.

The floor was a tangle of spent recording tape. Jon was too bored to file it away in the aluminium canisters.

Evidently, he thought irritably, we nowadays lack the staying power of the old pioneers. It was incredible the way they had persisted, through vast deserts of meaningless cosmic scribbling.

He went despondently to brew himself another cup of coffee.

The cupboard was bare of clean cups. He'd have to wash one.

" Blast," said Jon, grabbing at an empty cup and spilling the dregs over the bench.

" Something wrong ?" a voice enquired sweetly.

" No more clean . . ." He swung round. " Who the . . .?"

Ilsa came in through the half open door.

" I thought I'd come along to share in the fun. What's the news from Rigel ?"

" So you know—?"

"It's obvious—isn't it. At the Watchtower you read nothing but radio astronomy."

" News is in rather short supply at the moment." Jon gestured at the mess of tape on the floor. " We seem to have tuned in to an intermission."

He picked up another be-dregged coffee cup. " Care for coffee ?"

" Let me," said Ilsa. She took the cups off him, gathered up the serried ranks of the rest, and moved purposefully into the galley. There was a clatter of plastic cups on the metal sink, the hissing of a water heater, and in five minutes she was back with two aromatically steaming cups of fresh coffee.

Over the coffee, Jon explained his weeks of fruitless effort—the search programme he'd inherited from his predecessors. He showed her the columns of neat figures and the way a likely area of space was being systematically swept, lane by lane.

Ilsa's brow furrowed.

" You know something ? You—and the others—have been going about this in completely the wrong way."

Jon raised a quizzical eyebrow.

" What are the chances of getting a signal through ? One in a million ?" Ilsa asked.

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" Or in ten million ? Or ten billion, come to that." Jon grimaced. " Who knows ? One in a million would be as good a guess as any."

" Then you're like somebody who tries to win by backing every horse in a race. You should use a pin."

" How do you mean ?"

" Like me to show you ?" Ilsa's voice had an undertone of impish challenge.

Jon looked at her blankly.

" Watch !" she said, and put down her coffee cup. Then, temporarily at any rate, she seemed to go insane. She dashed berserkly round the control room, flinging switches at random, twirling controls, kicking odd pieces of gear—and generally snarling up the whole beautifully ordered search pattern.

" Hey, stop it ! Stop it !" shouted Jon.

Sparks sizzled. Warning lights flashed. Buzzers buzzed waspishly.

Overhead the great groaning disk of the radio telescope lurched wildly across the sky.

He tried to grab hold of her, but she slipped nimbly round a control bench, outpaced him, and did further wild work with the equipment.

" You're ruining the results of years of research !" yelled Jon.

" Results ?"

Finally he caught her, and held her tight in his arms.

He was flushed and very angry. " You little . . ." he started to say.

" Look," said Ilsa. " Look, you great dumb oaf."

She pointed to the central display, which had swung over unmistakably. The trace quivered, alive with meaning, in the " significance " zone. Coloured lights were winking. Cathode tubes glowed and rippled with strange meaningful waveforms.

" So much for your methodical methods !" said Ilsa scornfully, wrinkling her nose at him and putting out her little pink tongue.

He bent down and without releasing her from his arms, implanted a congratulatory kiss on her warm fragrant cheek.

Ilsa's eyes widened. For a moment she seemed to snuggle closer to him. Then she pushed him away with the flat of her hand on his chest.

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" Steady Romeo." She gestured at the recording tape which was spewing ecstatically from the computer, agog with the new signals.

" There's work to do, fellow scientist."

They began to interrogate the computer. In a short time the answers were ready.

The signals were pulse modulated. Each bleep was 5.4 seconds long, with a similar interval between.

The pattern was simple. Four bleeps, then a pause of 10.8 seconds, then three bleeps, another pause of 10.8 seconds, two bleeps, pause, one bleep . . . then silence. After an interval of 21.6 seconds the whole series began again.

" What do you make of it ?" asked Ilsa, when they had checked over the signal for the *n*th time.

" A diminishing arithmetical series," Jon said sagely.

" Meaning ?"

" I haven't the remotest."

The series of signals went on undiminished and unchanged except for occasional slight fading. Invariably the strength of signal picked up again in a minute or so.

4,3,2,1 . . .
4,3,2,1 . . .
4,3,2,1 . . .

It was like the chiming of some great carillon of bells, out in the depths of space.

Earlier students of the possibility of interstellar communications had all anticipated some kind of intellectual message—perhaps the theorem of Pythagoras.

But what they were getting seemed brutally simple.

So simple as to leave the mind tantalised and unsatisfied.

" What about an optical check on the source ?" suggested Ilsa.

" Of course !" said Jon. " We should have checked that earlier."

There was a big optical telescope in one of the domes which was kept continuously lined up on the same target as the radio telescope by automatic servos fed from the computer.

Jon slithered into the contoured seat and took a long look through the eyepiece.

Meanwhile Ilsa checked the reading from the computer and looked up the location on a star chart. She gave a little gasp of surprise.

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" The computer must have developed some kind of fault," she announced. " It gives the source as one of the extra-galactic nebulae. That's obviously impossible."

" Why ?" asked Jon.

" Because—well, work it out for yourself. The power needed for transmission would be unthinkably huge."

" Have a look at this," said John. He made way for Ilsa on the viewing seat.

She took an intent look.

" It *is* a nebula—and an extra-galactic one at that."

She stood up. " The explanation's simple enough. The computer and telescope are linked. They're both showing the same fault."

" Must have got out of alignment while they were in-operative."

They went back to the radio telescope room. The receiver was still churning out its regular succession of pulses. Jon rigged up a heterodyne oscillator to feed audible signals to a loudspeaker. The long bleeps of the transmissions sounded rather eerily through the control room.

Jon looked at a clock.

" Suppose we'd better be getting back to the Watchtower." He grinned at Ilsa. " Otherwise our alibi may not sound very convincing."

He glanced round at the massed tetratrons and the glowing display tubes. " We'll leave everything running and keep open a radio link."

He fixed up a small transmitter on 400 megacycles to feed a pocket-sized receiver with the the audible bleeps.

They left the radio telescope station together, and the bleeps from outer space followed them along the jungle trail.

During the night the signal changed.

Jon didn't observe precisely when it happened. He woke up suddenly in the middle of the night and switched on the receiver, which he'd left on a bedside table. At first the signal sounded exactly the same—a series of diminishing numbers :

3, 2, 1 . . .
3, 2, 1 . . .
3, 2, 1 . . .

Then it hit him. Before, the series had had an extra term :

4, 3, 2, 1 . . .
4, 3, 2, 1 . . .

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The signal had grown shorter. And it seemed—he couldn't explain why—to have a note of greater urgency now.

He sat up in bed, suddenly too excited to feel sleepy. Should he call up Ilsa on the intercomm ? The microphone was by his bed. His hand strayed towards it. No, she'd probably be too befuddled to realise what was happening. And it would disturb her beauty sleep.

Suddenly he'd become very solicitious about Ilsa's welfare. He found himself feeling warmer towards her than at any time since Trancer left.

Over breakfast Jon explained what had happened.

" But why didn't you wake me ?" asked Ilsa.

" Nothing we could do. The thing is, not to be caught out the same way again."

" We'll have to take turns to listen," Ilsa said.

" We can't keep up a continuous twenty-four hour watch—not for long, anyway. But don't worry — I'll organise something."

They got over to the radio telescope as soon as possible after a hurried breakfast.

Jon busied himself with some construction, using the ample supply of spare components which were stacked in the labora tory store.

He arranged a tape recorder to record the bleeps continuously, store them for half an hour, and then erase them.

Then came an elementary little counting circuit which listened to the signals and immediately detected any variation from the established pattern. If any change occurred a warning signal was sounded, and simultaneously the tape recorder—while continuing to record incoming signals—stopped erasing the earlier ones.

They would thus have a complete record of the change, and the signals both before and after it happened.

Jon called Ilsa, who had been wandering about the lab and proudly showed her his handiwork.

" Neat," she commented. " But what about a time check ?"

She added a relay-triggered camera which would photograph a clock face the moment the change occurred.

" Crude," commented Jon, grinning at her patronisingly.

" But effective," added Ilsa.

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The tension had left the air at the Watchtower now. Jon and Ilsa, sharing this new interest in common, discovered an easy-going comradeship between them.

It was about 3 p.m. when the warning buzzer went. They both started forward, and Jon pressed the key to request a playback of the last few minutes of recording.

The signals came bleeping through the midget loudspeaker in his hand :

3, 2, 1 . . .
3, 2, 1 . . .
3, 2, 1 . . .

and then abruptly :

2, 1 . . .
2, 1 . . .
2, 1 . . .

Ilsa looked at Jon.

" It's becoming clearer. This is some kind of a count down."

" Yes," said Jon, " and we're getting pretty close to the climax—or anticlimax." He pointed to the clock.

" Your trigger device will confirm the exact time when the change occurred. Then we'll have to wait for the next change to establish the precise interval after which the series is reduced by one."

" You're assuming that these changes occur at equal intervals."

" Yes, I am. Of course the tempo could get quicker or slower. But my guess is that it's constant. We shan't know for sure until the next change occurs."

Ilsa nodded.

" But if the last change happened between 3 a.m. and 5 a.m. last night, then the interval is from 10 to 12 hours. So the next change may occur at about 2 a.m."

Jon went up to the radio telescope station to reset the apparatus and confirm the exact time of the change. It was 2.58 p.m.

Before he came away it was already dark. He went to the optical telescope and busied himself with it for a considerable time.

When he got back to the Watchtower, they both turned in at about the usual time, but Jon found he couldn't get to sleep. He lay tossing and turning on the deep-foam couch, trying to focus his mind on the problem of what the count-down meant.

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There was one possibility that seemed to him absurd. He pushed it irritably to the very edge of his mind, but he couldn't quite get rid of it altogether.

To deny that it was possible was to admit that it was thinkable. And to admit that it was thinkable was to imply—however remotely—that it was, after all, possible.

Suddenly he was aware of a gentle tapping on the door.

" Come in," he called.

Ilsa slipped silently through the door, a flimsy gown gathered round her.

" I couldn't sleep . . ." she said. " I was going to ring you, but I was afraid you might be asleep."

" No, I was having trouble getting to sleep too."

" Do you mind . . .?" Ilsa sat down gracefully on the edge of his couch.

Jon was vaguely conscious of her proximity and beauty, because his mind was full of the puzzle of the transmissions. Nevertheless . . .

He got out of bed and went over to the door.

" Come over by the pool, where we can talk," he said. " I'll get you a drink."

Ilsa stood up, and followed him with perhaps only the merest hint of reluctance.

Jon reappeared with a drink in one hand and one of his dressing gowns in the other.

" Here, put this round you," he said. Ilsa allowed him to drape the opaque garment over her.

By 1.30 a.m., when the warning signal went again, they were deeply immersed in conversation. So much so that it came as a surprise and something of a shock to hear the penetrating burring of the buzzer cutting into the silence of the night.

Jon interrogated the recorder for the new signal.

Bleep . . .

Bleep . . .

—was all they were getting now.

Jon stood up. " We've got ten hours and thirty-two minutes to the end of the countdown. Better get some sleep now."

Ilsa walked across to the door of her room, but before she reached it she stopped, slipped off the borrowed dressing gown, and threw it back to him.

" Sleep tight," she said, and blew him a kiss.

Jon went back to his room and was asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow.

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They decided they'd both better be on hand at the radio telescope when the countdown ended.

When they arrived, Jon showed Ilsa the photographs he'd taken the previous evening.

Two hair lines crossed a jumble of stars, and at the point indicated by the intersection was an insignificant point of light. Their reference charts definitely pin-pointed this as one of the remoter extra-galactic nebulae.

Jon also showed her the calculation he'd made, which rendered the whole thing quite absurd. Even if the transmitter had used a reflector 1,000 miles in diameter, the power needed to send signals across the vast gulf of space would be $4 \times 10_{40}$ ergs per second.

"Roughly how much is that?"

"Ten million times the total energy output of the sun."

Ilsa laughed, a shade nervously.

When the moment arrived, Jon was in the radio lab. Ilsa had gone off to look through the optical telescope. Jon waited, with mounting tension.

Bleep
silence
Bleep
silence
Bleep

Would the moment pass and the signals continue? Or would they start to increase again, from one to two, and from two to three?

Bleep
silence
Bleep

Surely the zero point had passed already?

Bleep
silence
. . . . . .
. . . . . .
. . . . . .
. . . . . !

Suddenly, tantalisingly, without the slightest modulation, the signals had ceased.

Jon lunged forward and swung all the gain controls to maximum.

He heard only the hiss of meaningless interstellar static, like the sizzling of a million rashers of bacon. The scopes were full of rippling, waving "grass."

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What intelligence had transmitted the signals ? What did it all mean ?

He twisted his brain like a wet sponge. Nothing came out.

" Jon ! Jon !"

Ilsa was calling excitedly from the optical dome.

" Jon, look !"

He ran in huge strides to where she was.

" Look," she said breathlessly.

He squinted through the eyepiece.

" I can't see anything . . . what is there to see ?" he asked, with the agonised disappointment of a child.

Ilsa waved one of his photographs at him.

" Look how bright it is now—compared with this."

Jon suddenly saw what she meant.

Hitherto the nebula had an insignificant blip of light. Now it outshone all its neighbours.

" A nova !" exclaimed Jon.

" Supernova," corrected Ilsa.

A single star, exploding, now produced vastly more light than the entire galaxy had done before.

In a huge silent flash of unthinkable energy, all the planets of the twin suns perished, engulfed in a micro-microsecond. The huge double reflector near Kurag was consumed instantly, swifter than a piece of celluloid touched by a blowtorch flame. But all that was destroyed were machines—and the fabrications of machines.

Life had already gone elsewhere. Intelligence had migrated. Following the probing beam of its insight, it had gone to a remote, unpromising ground in the cosmos, where it might renew itself in alien surroundings.

They came out of the radio telescope station into the blinking darkness of the jungle.

" It's sad," said Ilsa, " that the first message we received is the last."

" A farewell."

The lights in the radio telescope station went out one by one behind them.

Jon turned towards the jungle path.

Suddenly Ilsa caught his arm—pointing upwards.

High up, in the tangled rigging of the radio telescope, was a kind of red-blue glow, half hidden in the maze of girders.

" What is it ?" asked Ilsa.

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" I'll go up and have a look."

" Be careful," she called after him.

Jon clambered up the steel ladder, its rungs taut under the resilient soles of his shoes.

The glow was clinging to the nub of the central aerial, at the focus of the reflector.

As Jon climbed along the catwalk, it seemed to move and respond to his approach. The inside of it was slowly boiling with gouts of red and blue fire.

Jon was very close now and could see pockets of blackness inside it, like spots on the sun. Acting on impulse, he touched the fringe of the glowing orb. It appeared to move towards him and be absorbed in his arm. But there was no unpleasant or otherwise disturbing sensation.

" What's happening ?" Ilsa's voice had an edge of anxiety.

" I'm coming down."

When he reached the top of the ladder, Ilsa screamed.

" Ee . . . it's all over you !"

Jon continued coming stolidly down the ladder, his shoes ringing dully on the rungs. Around him, he thought he sensed a brightness.

Ilsa shrank away, her hands spread in front of her. Now he definitely saw the brightness reflecting from her face.

" Is it . . . on me ?"

" Yes," she said.

" Seems harmless." Jon ran his hand over his head. " But, just in case, you'd better not touch me."

Jon felt strangely calm. He led the way down the path, Ilsa following at a safe distance.

Directly they arrived back at the Watchtower, Jon felt a delicious lassitude coming over him.

" Think I'll turn in," he announced.

" But aren't you going to try and . . . get rid of that thing ?"

" Oh, that !" Jon chuckled. " How ?"

" Have a bath—*anything*."

" Tell you the truth I'd forgotten it," said Jon. " Ignore it. I do."

He stifled a yawn.

" Pleasant dreams," he said.

As he turned to go to his room, Ilsa stretched out her arm and opened her mouth to say something. Then thought better of it and let him go.

* * *

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A sense of appalling distance. He was a sphere of light, weightless, pulsating with the energy of his own thoughts.

He felt himself being drawn by the impulse of thousands of like thoughts to the meeting. Somewhere, deep down in him was the sense of urgency. The suns, he knew by implicit cognition, were the cause. Explosion. Must transfer.

That was clear. But at the meeting, he sensed the fantastic nature of the proposition.

The leaders had in mind a planet of the utmost primitive squalor. And the species they proposed to transfer to? He squirmed inwardly in little vortices of repugnance.

But inevitable . . .

Later, he moved with the others to the centre of the projector in space.

He felt himself being caught up in the machine and milked of all his essential thought-patterns. He watched without emotion as his thought body, stripped of its meaning, drifted blankly away into space.

Then came the appalling sensation of being projected across vast distances.

The primitive planet was not unbearably repulsive. One might, he supposed, after vast time, become almost fond of it

But then he came face to face with the primitive creature to which he was going to transfer. Hideous! The formless dissymmetry of this crude biped . . .. Disgusting. Involuntarily he recoiled several diameters.

However, the inevitable must be faced.

He advanced resolutely, and made the transfer.

The primitive, a vigorous young male, seemed uneasily aware that something had happened. There was a sensation of bewilderment scrabbling around in the pathetic little brain. He sent out a small wave of reassurance. The primitive responded, drawing himself up a little on his two lower appendages, raising the domed lobe where the main sense organs were grouped.

Some parts of the primitive were less abhorrent than others. Now this lobe where the brain was, at the top, approached most nearly the ideal form of a sphere.

He fed down a thought and the primitive looked up at the sun and the sky, and trembled a little, as though he saw them for the first time.

The primitive stood for a long time gazing at the sky.

Ilsa was obviously bubbling over with some new idea.

" Did you sleep well?" she asked brightly.

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" Marvellously."

She wasn't listening.

" I've just realised something," she announced. " It should have been obvious all along."

" Oh ?"

" Those signals from the exploding star. How long do you suppose they would take to reach us ? They're not from this galaxy, remember."

Jon rubbed his chin. " That's a point. We could look up the distance in light-years."

" I've done it." Ilsa paused emphatically. " Those signals took 30,000,000 years to get here."

It adds up, thought Jon. Man became man by the addition of an alien intelligence that long ago. The beings travelled with the speed of thought along a thought beam—outstripping the radio waves by a matter of 30 million years.

"It was that long ago when the beings who sent them lived." Ilsa's voice ran on musically like a shallow stream. "Somehow that makes it easier to bear the thought of them being snuffed out like that."

" They didn't die," Jon said quietly.

" Didn't they ? How do you know ?"

Jon grinned. " Telepathy," he said.

" What, acting across 30,000,000 light years ?"

" Why not ? Those radio waves we received were modulated with thought impressions."

Ilsa frowned. " How do you modulate a lower frequency with one much higher ? Obviously thought vibrates much faster than the radio waves we were receiving."

" Easy," said Jon. " You slow down the vibrations to suit. Then over a period of time you gradually build up the desired image pattern. Like the old system of sending a picture along a wire."

Ilsa nodded.

" That was the thing you saw on the aerial," Jon went on. " The thing that fastened on to me. It came across as a dream."

" So they got away. In space ships ?"

" Not exactly." Jon looked around him, trying to formulate the idea in words. " It was like this . . ."

The speaker on the wall crackled briefly.

" Control here. Trancer will be returning for duty in one hour."

Bill Spencer.

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Mr. Porter's second story (his first was "The Third Word" in the March issue) runs the gamut of the psi powers—lightly and almost humorously—as he unravels a bank robbery.

STILL TIME

by DAVID PORTER

Keep a clear desk and you'll keep a clear head. That's one of the cliches I'm inclined to trot out from time to time. Nikki, she's my secretary, sometimes makes pointed remarks about my *empty* desk, but that can't be helped.

This particular morning I sat down at the thing and eyed its barren vastness fretfully. It's an antique—a big slab of polished teak with drawers down both sides. I can't stand these modern glass monstrosities. A couple of hours of staring past my work seeing my knees and I'd be finished.

I sat back in my chair and sighed. This early-morning desk-contemplation was a ritual and just occasionally, when work got too routine or too dull, it made me feel a little old.

I opened the door and called "Anything new this morning, beautiful?" to Nikki. Refusal to whisper into intercoms is another of my peculiarities—exercise the vocal chords or you may lose them.

"There's an Aid Request come in from Sub-zone Five, chief." Nikki's voice was its usual bright self. As a secretary (and as a woman) she had only one fault—her steadfast refusal to appreciate my charms. "Coming in now."

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A thin file floated in through the door. I took it from there and set it down on the virgin surface of my desk. Nikki and I are telekines.

I opened the request and saw right away that it was of more than ordinary interest. In case you don't know I'd better explain that police activities are organized basically by sub-zones. The vast majority of crimes are handled by the sub-zone staff and that's that. But the law requires that if a crime remains unsolved for fifteen days it must be referred to a higher authority—Zone Headquarters.

Now the dates on this particular Aid request showed that only eight days had elapsed since the crime. This meant that the sub-zone personnel regarded it as sufficiently unusual to justify shouting for help before they were forced to.

I read on.

On Monday, May 18th, 2017 a small travelling bag had been stolen from Paul City Stores, a big department store located (as the file kindly informed me) in Paul City. It wasn't a particularly valuable article—C 1.389 was the list price. It had an esper-proof lock which put it at the top of its price range but otherwise it was undistinguished.

On the Thursday of the same week, at 14.39, all the ready cash in the Egerton Park branch of the Intercity Bank disappeared. This amounted to between four and five hundred credits—a pretty tidy sum.

The file ended with a series of paragraphs which said in effect : no clues, no theories—help !

On the face of it this pair of crimes was flatly impossible. I remember eight years ago, when Yang-Tsen was elected World President on a platform promising universal application of the Foster Technique, most of my colleagues shook their heads and gloomily predicted that as esper talents became widespread crime statistics would soar.

In fact just the opposite happened. When only a few, relatively undeveloped, espers exist they can turn to crime with comparative impunity. Turn a quarter of the population into fully fledged espers with a vast diversity of talents and you have an enormous pool of labour magnificently equipped to prevent crime.

So the cashiers in the bank would all be telekines, and the bank doorman would probably be a telemote—he'd scan the

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minds of the customers for the characteristic pattern of emotions which would spell potential thief.

And the whole building would be protected by Baker Screens —no teleport would be able to enter or leave except by the door.

How, with that kind of protection, do you make cash simply vanish from the tills ? I could see why Sub-zone Five had been in a hurry to pass the buck.

I called through to Nikki to get me a reservation on the next jet to Paul City and then turned to the phone.

I checked with the file for the number and then dialled. Colours swirled on the screen and then firmed into the pert features of a switchboard clerk.

" My name is Jaxon," I said. " I'm head of Esper Division, Zone Headquarters." For a second I basked in the awe which sprang into her eyes. A note pad sailed through the door and came to rest in front of me. I glanced at it and said " Will you inform Sub-zone Chief Faol that I will be arriving at Paul City airfield at 13.48. I'd like him to meet me there. Reference : his Aid Request 5-31-C." I checked that she'd got the message right and broke the connection.

Paul City is about fifty miles south of the eastern tip of Lake Monarte. The jet made several stops : it took about two hours to make the eight-hundred-odd miles and I spent the time mulling over half a dozen alternate theories. Don't get the idea that these two crimes *were* impossible—there ain't no such thing. But they were definitely way outside routine, even for me and I get landed with all the weirdies.

Faol was waiting when I stepped out of the jet. Now there are some men I dislike on sight and I realized that I was going to have to keep pretty hard hold on myself not to be downright rude to this one.

He was a big, heavy-jowled character and he wore his uniform as though it proved he was President Yang. I never wear a uniform and there was no need for him to except on civic occasions. Also, he'd obviously used his authority to meet me out by the plane. That made two black marks before we'd even begun.

I shook my head (mentally) as I shook his hand and introduced myself.

" Glad to have you with us, sir," he said. " This thing has got us tied up in knots."

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"Not 'Sir'," I said gently, telling him my name again, "*Herm* Jaxon. Let's hope I can help you untie them."

We walked in silence through the airfield buildings and he ushered me into a large black and gold aircar which came complete with beetle-browed driver and a snappy salute. When we were settled back in the cushions he asked me where I wanted to begin.

"Let's start with your version of the story," I said. "I'll ask questions as they occur to me."

He gave me an account of the travelling bag theft which didn't add much to the Aid Request and finished with "We didn't feel overly worried by that business. After all it was a comparatively insignificant item and there were other possible explanations."

"Oh? Such as?"

"Well, the sales clerk might have been mistaken in believing that the bag had been on her stand."

"Do Paul City Stores have a stock records computer?"

"Of course."

"You checked with it?"

He nodded reluctantly. "Yes. The bag was down as being for sale at that stand. But it might have been a computer error."

I tried to be patient. "How likely is that? Taken in conjunction with the clerk's conviction that the bag had disappeared?"

He shrugged uncomfortably. "Not very likely."

"No." I smiled at him sweetly. "It didn't occur to you that the theft of the bag might be a trial run?" He just looked at me blankly. There used to be a belief that cops are dumb. Nowadays it's a fact. For one thing the job of Sub-zone Chief is a political appointment—for another they just don't get enough practice. I spelled it out for him.

"Suppose someone had discovered a method of stealing without being detected or anticipated. First they'd try it out in a small way, then, if it worked, they'd move into the big time. See what I mean?"

A dull enthusiasm glowed briefly in his eyes. "Of course! Why didn't we see that?"

I didn't tell him. I said "It's only a theory but it'll do to work on. Now, did you check the staff at the store?"

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" Pretty thoroughly. There's a floorwalker who's a telemote —she swears she didn't catch anything remotely resembling a theft-pattern all that day. The actual clerk was only a norm but the adjacent clerk was a telekine and she reckons she'd have noticed if the bag had been taken that way."

" Did you check on the Baker Screens ? Are they fitted with an interlock ?"

"We checked against malfunction," he said slowly. "What, exactly, is an interlock ?"

I almost threw up my hands in disgust. " Don't you read your bulletins ?" I asked. The look on his face told me the answer. " About six months ago a bank in Edinburgh was robbed. We had the two men who did it behind bars and screens within ten days but their method was reported in the bulletins. One was a telekine, the other a teleport. The 'kine went into the bank just like a customer and with no intention to steal. At a pre-arranged instant he cut the power to the Baker Screens. Then the 'port whipped in, grabbed the cash and was gone within ten seconds. The 'kine returned the Screens to normal and walked out with the rest of the crowd.

" Three weeks later Intercontinental Psionics had perfected a 'kine-proof interlock for the Baker Screen generators. All screens are in process of being modified. I wondered whether the modding had reached Paul City Stores."

Faol was beginning to look a little shaken. I think he saw that maybe there was more to being a cop than wearing a uniform. He shook his head and said " I don't know. But I can check." He reached out to the car phone.

I let him make the call even though I was pretty sure it wouldn't matter. The *bank* screens would be certain to have interlocks.

He turned from the phone eventually and confirmed my guess. Paul City Stores had had interlocks fitted a month before.

We turned then to the second theft and the story was just about the same. There were no holes in the bank's armour but the credits had still disappeared.

I finally decided that an on-the-spot visit might do some good and would certainly relieve the strain of Faol's company. He leaned forward to give the beetle-browed salute some instructions and the car rose up into the air.

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We were silent for a while and then he asked whether I had any theories.

For answer I turned to him and said " Tell me, about how many esper talents would you think there were ?"

He considered for a minute and I could see him realize that my question meant there were more than he thought. I guessed he would double his estimate.

" I'm a norm, myself," he said a shade defensively. " I don't know much about these things. Maybe twenty ?"

" At the moment," I told him, " there are eighty-nine listed And another one's added every month or so."

He was startled but he nodded, accepting my figure. " I hadn't realized it was that many but you do hear about odd ones now and then. There was a woman in Boston I read about who was able to talk with dogs. A sort of off-beat telepath."

I couldn't let him get away with that so I capped it. " About a week ago I heard about an old guy who trundled along to his local Foster Institute and claimed he could hear radio programmes esper-wise."

I waited.

Faol asked " Could he ?"

I grinned broadly. " No. He was deaf. The boys at the Institute found that his hearing aid had a dry joint !"

Beetle-brow guffawed at this, quite unaware of the black look that Faol directed at his back. He must have had a more extensive knowledge of electronics than his superior.

As Faol was contemplating the diversity of esper talent we dropped out of the traffic pattern and began to spiral down towards an area which I assumed was the Egerton Park after which the bank was named. We landed in an aircar stand which lay along one edge of the open ground.

Faol pointed across the walkway to a conservative glass and chrome building across which was written ' Intercity Bank.' It stood a little apart from its fellows, smugly conscious that although money may be the root of all evil it is also of the highest social value.

I turned to Faol with what I hoped was a friendly grin. " Look, if you don't mind I think I'll go in and talk to the manager alone." I looked at my watch. " And it's after 16.00 so don't trouble to wait. When I'm through here I'll knock off for the evening."

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Faol was reluctant but he finally agreed not to wait. I made sure I had the address of his Paul City office and then jumped out of the car. I watched until I saw it disappear in the west-bound traffic, then crossed the walkway to the bank.

The manager introduced himself as Martin Brekker. He was a tall, lean man with a hungry, ascetic face ; young for the position that he held.

He told me essentially the same story as Faol but he told it much better. He was fully aware of the importance of interlocks on the Baker Screens—he'd even had a psionics engineer in to check them a few days after the theft. The man found nothing wrong.

" Have you got any ideas ?" I asked him. " Any suggestions that might be any help ?"

I caught him eyeing me sharply as he shook his head and I guessed he was wondering whether my efforts had any chance of being more successful than Faol's. " No-o. I thought that was your province ?"

I nodded. " True. But the amateur, on-the-spot opinion is often a lot of help." Perhaps I was a bit needled by his uncertainty about my competence because I said " Do you know what a chronist is ?"

" An esper talent ?"

" Yes. When the chronist pushes his mental button everything and everybody round him freezes. It's like stopping a movie with the camera projecting a single frame. A falling weight hangs in mid air : a running man stops in mid stride. You can imagine what I mean. Time stops. The chronist can amble about, do what he likes with everybody round him still as waxworks. Then he presses his button again and everything restarts where it left off.

" It's pretty rare. Off hand I'd say there weren't more than a couple of scores of them listed."

" You think the thief is one of them ?" Brekker asked.

" Yes and no," I told him, just to keep him guessing, and asked if I could have a brief private interview with each of his staff.

" Surely you don't think any of my people are involved ?"

" How many telemotes have you got on the staff ?"

" Two." He sounded puzzled.

" That eliminates the possibility altogether, then. While it's true that a person with good emotional control can suppress the theft pattern for short periods it would be quite impossible

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for them to do so for six hours each day and every day. If you'd had only one telemote there would still have been the chance that he was the chronist. The second one rules that out.

" No, I just want background detail. Maybe one of them has noticed something that might be of use."

None of them had. But the seventh that Brekker sent in was the cashier from position four.

I'd only seen her top third when I came in and I was prepared to be disappointed. I wasn't. She was a spectacular redhead, stylishly dressed and coiffed. Definitely the number one scenic attraction of the Egerton Park branch.

She closed the door behind her and raised an elegant eyebrow in query. I motioned her to the chair. Now, being a telekine involves certain distinct temptations. And succumbing to those temptations can be fraught with danger if the object of your interest shares your talent.

I remember once in the early days with Nikki I'd idly tickled her ankle in a moment of weakness ; she in her office, I in mine. Instantly she'd produced a very fair imitation of a wasp sting—right in the middle of my back, the one place I can't reach to scratch.

Despite the memory, temptation stirred as I watched the redhead drape herself on the chair. I fell.

For a second I thought she was going to blush. Then she grinned.

I leaned forward and grinned back. " Listen," I said, " I confess. This interview was just an excuse to meet you. Can you think of any good reason for not having dinner with me this evening ?"

She pretended to ponder for a moment, still smiling at me in a way which made me mighty glad I'd come to Paul City in person, and finally shook her head. I arranged to meet her outside the bank at quitting time and sent her off.

I've said that being a telekine involves one in special temptations—it also offers certain decided advantages. So if you exercise your imagination (or your memory if you happen to be a 'kine) you'll understand that chronists and bank robberies and trivial details like that didn't play any part in my evening.

I woke up at 08.20 the next morning feeling tired but reasonably fresh. I hadn't been too high when I got to the

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hotel to take two of the little green pills which some eternally-to-be-blessed gentleman invented to prevent hang-over.

I called down to room service and ordered breakfast in bed. Then I lay back and mapped out the day's activities.

By the time I had eaten and showered and dressed it was well into business hours—I sat down at the phone and got through to Headquarters.

I talked first to Esper Records and had them drag out the names and locations of all known chronists. There were only seven in my Zone : all solid, reputable citizens. I spent a weary forty minutes checking their movements by phone—they were all clean. I called H.Q. again and got through to Lab.

We discussed my needs for a while. I thought I knew exactly what I wanted but that is never precise enough for Lab. Maximum weight ? Colour ? External appearance ? A long list of details much of which I answered with a shrug. Finally they grudgingly agreed to deliver ' two off ' to Nikki by the end of the morning.

I transferred to her next. She looked at me closely and shook her head. " Been hard at it again, Chief ?"

I smiled as brightly as I could. " It's a tough case."

" Was she ?" Nikki's eyes were understanding—not a pretty sight at that hour of the morning.

" Lab," I told her severely, " will be delivering two black boxes to you before noon. I want you to rush right down to the field with them and see they get on to the 12.30 jet. O.K.?"

She nodded. I checked that no new business had come in during my absence, had her record a summary of all that I had learned and done so far, approved the new shade of lipstick with which she was experimenting, and cut off.

I took the lift to the lobby on the top floor and paid my bill. From the roof I took a cab across to Egerton Park. On my way through the bank I winked (a shade ruefully) at the appropriate cashier and then knocked at the door of Brekker's office.

After the pleasantries I got right down to business. " Mr. Brekker you said yesterday that you would be willing to co-operate in catching this criminal." He nodded. " I want to ask you to help me set a trap. Can you find some reasonably plausible excuse to bring a large load of unmarked bills either into or out of the bank at some precise hour this afternoon ?"

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Brekker thought for a while. " I think so. This branch has an incinerator which used to dispose of bills that were taken out of circulation. We handled all the dead currency for the whole area. But another branch does the job now—they've got more modern equipment. If their incinerator were to go out of action for the day it would be an excuse to bring about two thousand credits over here for disposal. Would that do ?"

" That'd be great," I said. " Can you fix it with the other branch ?"

" Easy." Brekker smiled. " The manager is my brother."

" That's it then," I told him. " Exaggerate the amount a bit. Oh, and one important thing—see that the cash is brought over by a teleport. We want to make sure that it's snatched in or just outside this bank."

We ran over the details and set zero hour for 16.00. Then I left to see Faol. I reckoned that with his political connections he'd make a good publicity agent.

I was right but it took some persuading to make him act. He wanted to know all about my theories, why the trap was planned, who I thought was the thief and so on. I finally shut him up by pointing out that since he was technically a suspect it would never do to reveal too much of my plans.

" But it's so *obviously* a trap !" he complained.

It looked like his last argument so I decided to answer it. " Look at it this way," I told him. " Either our man is dumb, in which case he will not realize that it's a trap. Or he's smart —then he'll see the trap. But he's discovered an unbeatable system, remember ? He'll think that nothing can touch him. So he'll look on the trap as a challenge and bite for that reason."

Faol was not entirely convinced but he sat down at the phone and started calling the various fax agencies and TV newsrooms with which he had contacts.

I left him at it and went down to the airfield to wait for the shipment from Nikki. I had about an hour to kill so I wandered into the airfield restaurant to get some lunch. As I was finishing the meal the first signs of Faol's efforts began to make themselves felt.

The fax was first. The 13.30 edition of the Paul *Herald* had the headline " ' Five ' Police Show Confidence " and underneath there was an article which sketched in the facts of our

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trap. The TV news at 13.45 on GB-5-QN was forthright in its criticism. If enough was known of the details of the earlier crime to make this delivery safe why had no arrest been made? By 14.00 all the channels were carrying the news.

The jet was due at 14.07. I tore myself away from the screens and went across to the freight delivery counter. Nikki and the Lab came through—the two black boxes were there.

By 15.40 Faol, Brekker and I were gathered in Brekker's office waiting for zero hour. I'd strapped my secret weapons in position, one covering the walkway outside the bank where the messenger would materialize, the other the interior from door to vault. I'd seen the messenger personally and impressed on him the need for exact timing.

Faol looked at his watch for the third time in five minutes. He was still looking puzzled. I'd explained to him about chronists and he was beating his brains out trying to guess what was in the boxes.

Brekker said " Perhaps while we wait you'd like to illuminate the mystery. To be honest I don't see quite what the trap is expected to accomplish ?"

" Neither does the chronist," I told him.

" But if the man can stop time as you say, how is anything going to have any effect ? '

I grinned at him. " What chance do you think the Aussies have in the Fourth Test ?" I asked.

He took the hint and we began to discuss the latest scandal: a TV columnist had suggested that one of the Australians' brightest young bowlers was not the norm he pretended to be but a 'kine who had managed to fail the tests of the Foster Institute. I got so absorbed in the argument that Faol had to remind me that time was running short.

We went out into the main hall of the bank to watch.

Promptly on the dot of 16.00 the messenger pushed through the doors carrying a large bag. He took five steps towards us and the bag disappeared. He looked down in surprise at his empty hand. There was such a heavy atmosphere of tension in the room as everybody's attention focussed on the man that I had a sudden irrational urge to shout ' Boo ' or something even less original.

The messenger came on up to us and said sheepishly " I guess I was robbed !"

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" I guess you were," I said happily and went to retrieve the precious cameras.

Back in Brekker's office I packed them into my case and sat back to give the explanation.

" There are two main clues in this case," I told Faol and Brekker. " One you ought to have guessed, the other you don't know.

" One : our chronist is strictly an amateur. If he had been trained by a Foster Institute he would be on record and he would know what his talent was all about. He wouldn't have needed the trial run at Paul City Stores. So his chronism is a secondary talent which has developed since he completed his esper training and which he *doesn't know very much about.*

" Clue two : I *do* know a little about how a chronist works. *In effect* a chronist stops time. That's true. But he does not actually stop time. If you consider for a moment what that would involve you'll see it would be impossible. He'd have to stop not only the action of all life on earth but also the movements of the planets and stars, the whole universe. That's a lot to ask. Time is a big thing.

" No. What he does is alter his *own* time scale by a whole order of magnitude—he doesn't stop us, he speeds himself up. This is why I stress the fact that he's an amateur.

" To him the whole world round him seems to have frozen solid. To him, *in effect*, time has stopped. But if he had set down in one place for long enough he would have seen that things around him were still moving. He didn't."

I grinned at them and patted the case which held the cameras. " These simply take movies at very high speed. High enough speed to stop the movement even of a chronist."

I turned to Faol. " When I get them developed I'll send you a copy of the relevant section. With a picture, picking the man up should be easy." I almost said child's play.

Mid-morning of the next day Nikki breezed into my office and dumped a stack of stills in the middle of my desk. She was grinning all over her face. I leafed through the pictures and did a double take.

The redhead cashier !

" Well, Chief ?" asked Nikki sweetly. " I thought you told Brekker that his staff couldn't be involved ?".

I nodded glumly. " How in hell did she manage to hoodwink the bank telemotes ?"

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" Maybe she gave them the glad-eye whenever she felt a theft pattern coming on," Nikki suggested.

I looked up at her then and grinned. " Close but not quite. She exercised her other talent."

Nikki raised a perplexed eyebrow.

" As you say, when she felt a theft pattern she had to do something. She's a clever girl—she simply stopped time. Then she could take five minutes or five hours to revel in the joys of impending theft *and to get over it*. She wouldn't slow down to normal time again until the bout had passed. To pick her up the telemotes would have had to sense a pattern which only lasted for a few milliseconds."

So that was that. And Nikki now has another piece of evidence to reinforce her claim that I have unlisted esper talent—an initiative attraction to criminal types.

David Porter

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In fiction, global disasters are usually left to the novel, where an author has room to develop the magnitude of his plot. Despite this axiom, new author Harold Parsons manages to compress a world-wide calamity into an extremely neat short story.

THE FUNNEL

by HAROLD PARSONS

The terror began most innocently in the single storey office block of an industrial firm in North Staffordshire. A clerk, Arnold Grierson, sat at his desk in front of a wall lined with machines whirring busily behind press-button casings, calculating, tabulating wages, man-hour output, vitality-plus, age/sex ratio, stress potentiality mental/physical of each of four thousand employees as at 2.15 p.m. on a July afternoon in 1987. He sat alone in the centre of the large room, dwarfed, yet magnificent in isolation, keeping the machines obedient at a respectful distance across a grey-black floor.

Behind him, across more antiseptic emptiness, the General Manager in a raised transparent shell swivelled his chair through an arc, illuminating first one telescreen, then another, scanning production in the plant : now the circular atom furnace three quarters of a mile from top to bottom, let into the sides of a former pitshaft, tempering the seamless skypoles of the New Weapon : now the polishing bays, where razor-thin vanes were burnished, and workmen saw in the spinning discs the emptiness of stars, and felt the gaseous nebulae of a

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thousand galaxies brush past like smoke ; these, too, components of the New Weapon.

At the base of the shell three junior clerks, two girls and a youth, chattered in unimaginative undertones as they waited to feed multicoloured cards into the computers.

A click from the centre machine. It spoke to Arnold behind a red winking eye. " Re-check calc 09 against code 82X. Believe 14."

Arnold pressed a green button on his desk and a flat-topped console machine flashed rows of lighted figures along a charted graph. He watched it, bored, tired after a heavy lunch, the sun beating through a side window so that he knew he should lower the blind, but loved to feel the sun and would rather suffer discomfort than shut it out, for who knew what might happen to the sun if the Weapon was ever harnessed to it, as the politicians said it might, scorching enemy territory from inaccessible realms of space.

The console stopped. Fourteen, it was, the Audicheck correct as usual ! He depressed a row of buttons in quick succession and rubbed out the pencilled figures on a foolscap sheet in front of him.

As he laid down the rubber it slid off the desk. He watched it fall, too lazy to stop it. His brain flashed an alert. Something was wrong. The rubber hadn't fallen as it should have done. It was a hefty rubber, and always before when he had dropped it it had bounced several times. This time it had floated to the ground and stayed there.

Arnold picked it up and let it fall again. The same thing happened. It was as if someone had scooped the inside from the rubber and filled it with helium, or had substituted one of those trick things bought in shops along with imitation beetles and other realistic looking jokes. He examined it. It had not been tampered with.

The Audicheck spoke again. Pleaded. An almost human call for aid. This time Arnold had to cross to it, turning a knob to release the pressure of a clogged spool in the intestines of the machine. He held the rubber in his hand. Returning to his seat, he dropped it, thoughtfully, deliberately. This time it fell naturally and bounced under the junior's table.

" See him ? Did it on purpose so that he could get down and see my legs," laughed one of the girls.

Arnold groped for the rubber. " Don't kid yourself. I can see match-sticks anytime."

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When he was alone in the office he conducted hurried experiments, dropping books, papers, rulers, at different points about the room. Everywhere was normal except for an area about the size of a dinner plate to the right of where he sat. There, the gravity was less.

It was incredible. Two sheets of paper, released simultaneously, one inside and one outside the area, reached the ground at different speeds. With heavier objects the variance was less marked but nonetheless discernible.

Arnold called at the Reference Library on his way home. He could find nothing to explain the peculiarity : no record of known faults in the gravity-structure of the globe. He spent a sleepless night wondering what to do. Should he report it ? Was it important ? His standing with the firm was not good. He was bitter over lack of promotion, and they knew it and might think he was frittering his time away with tales of variable gravitation. Better to keep quiet and be on the safe side.

The whole thing seemed rather stupid in the warmth of bed, and anyway it was harmless. What was a bit less gravity, after all? Ignoring it could hurt no-one. It wasn't as if he had uncovered a timebomb in the stockroom !

At work the next morning he could not resist knocking objects from his desk at every opportunity to ensure that the oddity of gravitation was real.

" Clumsy, aren't you ?" The most pert of the girls startled him by picking up a ledger within the area of reduced gravity. " Funny ! I thought it was heavier than that."

Unwitting confirmation !

As the weeks passed Arnold discovered new things about the Degrav-area, as he called it. It was not static, but widened slowly, the lack of gravity growing more pronounced. A toilet tissue hung suspended and would not fall at all until it drifted outside the effected perimeter : a coin floated like a leaf, flatwise ; the rubber was as a snowflake, and when Arnold was alone he stood on his desk with his arm upheld before releasing it. Jumping from the desk, he was able to blow the rubber from side to side as it fell, so very, very gently.

By the end of the year the rubber would not fall, paper sailed towards the ceiling, and the effected area had grown to the size of a dustbin lid. Gravity in reverse ! Arnold became frightened. He could not keep it a secret much longer.

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Already he had moved his desk slightly, and was taking care to keep papers clipped together in case one should rise in the air and be noticed.

Two months later the area had widened to take in where he sat. He felt a constant sickness as his food lay light and tended to rise within him, and his uvula curled upwards in his mouth. He had taken to arriving at the office early and leaving late in order to experiment, and there came a day when the released rubber hit the ceiling with the same rebounding force that elsewhere it would hit the floor.

It was time to tell someone. And why not? He hadn't invented the freak, so why should he try to hide it as if he were guilty? Later, he was to wonder if some ally of the anti-gravitation force had willed him to silence in order to establish a bridge-head without hindrance.

The General Manager was a hardbitten realist. Arnold had difficulty in persuading him to remain behind after everybody had gone, but when he had seen the marvel for himself his attitude changed.

"You've told no-one of this?"

"No, sir."

"Good. It must go no further."

"But . . . Mr. Rollings . . ."

"Listen to me, Grierson. You know what we are making here. You know about the Weapon. Nothing must interfere with its manufacture. Nothing! We will re-arrange those computers so as to form a hollow square. Within that hollow will be this . . . this minus-gravity phenomenon. No one else need know."

Arnold was uncomfortable. "It keeps getting bigger, sir."

"So you say. It may not continue to do so. Anyway, it has only widened by—what?—a yard or so in about nine months. At that rate we have ample floorspace to conceal it at least until the Weapon is completed. Make no mistake, once it leaks out we shall be besieged by reporters, mineralogists, scientists, and Lord knows who else. A fine advertisement for a secret weapon plant! You wouldn't want to jeapordise work of National importance?"

"I . . . I don't know, sir."

Rollings offered his cigarettes, staring at him with discerning eyes that had absorbed the know-how of a thousand charts and drawings to get this project under way. "By the way,

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Grierson. I believe you were passed over for promotion some little time ago. Now I have heard there is a vacancy in Costing. The departmental head is retiring."

This was more like it. Arnold thought of the girl he had lately met. Beautiful but expensive!

The new head of Cost department was popular with the management. He shot up the salary scale as his rubber had shot up to the ceiling in that last experiment before the area was enclosed behind the backs of the electronic computers.

Eighteen months later Rollings' worried face appeared on the inter-office teliscreen and asked him to step down to Statistics.

When he arrived Rollings took him without a word into the outer office. A group of top officials stood round the computers. Men were sliding planks under the machines and marvelling.

"They're three inches off the ground," said Rollings.

The scientists came, and the mineralogists and reporters, just as Rollings had predicted. Arnold was famous overnight, his face on every TV screen in the globe as he described how he had made the discovery. The office block was demolished as men tore at the earth and drilled deep and took samples of ore for analysing to find out why this spot of all others should have lost its gravitation.

They found it hadn't. Basically, the composition of the earth was exactly the same as that adjoining it where gravity was normal. But even as they worked, under difficulty (for no sooner was an implement laid aside than it rose into the air, and men wore leaden boots to prevent themselves from leaping upward with each step) the infected area widened.

It was inexplicable. It was a phenomena, a freak, a joke for comedians. In the difficult years of 1990-91 with the constant talk of War and preparation for War, it was good fun to the layman. The curious came by all forms of transportation, and on foot. The site was on the itinary for foreign tourists along with Windsor Castle and Shakespeare's birthplace. Yet there was nothing to see but an ever widening ring of boards, and a retreat from the neighbourhood as the great plant where Arnold worked was moved piece by piece to new surroundings, and surrounding property was put up for sale with no purchasers.

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One summer, students of a local training college broke into the site as part of their Rag Day revelry, and sang and danced and strummed ukeleles in midair, the girls in their underwear because skirts and frocks sailed above their heads.

The frolic prompted a television company to bid, unsuccessfully, for the site in order to televise spectacular off-the-ground colour shows as a new viewer-catching gimmick.

Meanwhile, Arnold travelled the country, lecturing to old ladies in village halls and remote community centres on how one day he had dropped a desk rubber and it had fallen strangely.

The oddity was a new wonder of the world. Scarcely, yet, a menace.

Then airmen flying above the area reported a strange behaviour of their machines, as if they had entered an air-pocket upside down so that they had plummetted away from the earth.

Professor Lingstrom in charge of the investigation formed a theory that a gravity beam from some other planet much larger than earth had pierced the atmosphere and focussed on this corner of North Staffordshire. The Government, embroiled in international squabbles, inclined to the view that it was the work of an enemy power. Was it not significant that it had happened on the premises of a factory engaged in the production of the most devastating weapon of all time ?

" Blast the enemy with rockets and you'd soon see the gravity farce put a stop to," cried the warmongers.

They called it a " Show-off," a display of scientific chicanery.

Yet each Power in the hemispheres flatly denied responsibility, while still the anti-gravity area spread, a mile, a mile and a half, gathering strength as if a giant vacuum-cleaner had been turned on, sucking up everything in its path.

In the early days one practical use was made of it when the Radio-Active Substances Bill was amended so that the deadly waste products of atomic plants and nuclear reactors could be fed into it and gulped out into space, instead of being buried in the sea, or underground in lead containers. There was jocular speculation as to what the brains behind the device, if indeed there were any, would think of having Britain's poison-waste flung at them. It was a cartoonist's laugh, a spit-in-the-eye.

It was a feeble jest.

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Two miles, now, of minus-gravity, and the world grew uneasy. A space-sphere crammed with instruments was placed within the area. As it rose into space, radio telescopes tracked its course. For five months it travelled, drawn without any motive power of man along a gravity beam, past the moon and Venus, undeflected by the pull of any heavenly body, until it passed beyond the range of science.

When the last dwindling echoes of the probe's transmitter had faded the area of degravitation was four miles, having doubled itself in less than a half year, frightening in its rate of increase, and drawing off everything inside it with an upward pull equal to that of a moon-rocket at blast off.

People awoke to the stark fact that it might spread until the entire ball of the world was within its span, itself flung up amongst the stars.

Frantic attempts were made to contact such stellar beings as might be responsible, and all manner of messages were inserted into the funnel, messages in all earth-tongues, in writings and on recordings, and in every known code, cypher and picture sign. All to no avail, desperation neared as the funnel broadened : ten miles, fifteen, swallowing one of the few things that could investigate its origin when the Jodrell Bank radio-telescope vanished bowl-over-steelwork into the vortex.

By 1996 Britain was virtually severed in two, the perimeter of the funnel close to Liverpool in the West and Skegness in the East. Martial law had been declared. No vehicular traffic ran from North to South, and only by sea and by hoverbus circling the funnel could contact be maintained.

The world watched anxiously. No thought now that it was the work of a terrestrial power. Fearing a similar outbreak elsewhere on the globe, round the clock anti-gravity squads were formed to test every inch of territory, and millions of people of all creeds spent their time in dropping objects and watching the rate of fall in dread anticipation.

Mass evacuation of Britain was begun. The Royal Family and the Government were in Canada. There was Riot and Religious Revival. In Australia, a hoaxer was lynched for saying that he had dropped a pencil which had not fallen to the ground.

A year later, when the funnel was seventy miles in radius and lipping over both East and West coastlines, Scientists knew that unless it could be halted the world was doomed. Waves,

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breaking upon shore, reared up in the air, each crest rising upon the other like a wall two hundred feet high before toppling backward in thousands of tons within the fringe of normal gravity.

Tides were upset. Tidal waves washed over the Fens and the Low Countries to an extent never before experienced. In the West the Isle of Man disappeared under bucking seas, for no ocean could exist within the funnel, so that where it protruded beyond the coast a mountain of water rose continually like some fantastically inverted Niagara Falls.

It was time for the world to think again. Those in far places who had thought that the creeping destruction would not reach them in their lifetime had to realise that it did not need to do so; that the shifting seas would drown them long before.

And there seemed nothing that could be done.

But Science did not give up the challenge. No thought of Global War now as leaders met, Russian with American, Chinese with Indian, in the laboratories and conservatories of the world.

They planned a super H-bomb, a string of H-bombs, a veritable conveyer-belt of H-bombs to be inserted into the funnel to explode at point of destination, wherever in the universe it might be, and so destroy the source of the menace.

Surely it would work? It *must* work! There was no question of the bombs going endlessly into orbit. The experiments with the probe had established that objects swept into the funnel followed a straight path. Somewhere, it must have an end.

The world gasped at the magnitude of the plan. Out came the secret atomic stockpiles, the modern horrors and the museum pieces of the Nineteen Forties, the hoards held by small nations who had harboured them for protection or surprise aggression. Interspersed between the bombs would be trailer spheres to relay the transmitted signals of those in front so that no matter how far the cortege travelled its foremost signals would not this time go out of range of earth.

When the first bomb hit, the world would know.

But for the dreadful menace underlying the project it was a scientific dream. Always hitherto the problem of getting a projectile into space had been in the initial build-up of sufficient thrust to overcome gravity. That problem no longer existed. The funnel was now so powerful that anything within it was gathered up with the thrust of a thousand launching pads.

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Birmingham had long since been sucked up, brick by brick, house by house, street by street, as had Manchester, Liverpool, Nottingham, and scores of smaller towns.

Operation Saviour began on the first of January 2,000. It was a day of Prayer, and everywhere where Man dwelt and understood what was happening he listened to the Church or Mission bell and knelt and prayed according to his Faith.

And it was the day that Arnold Grierson died.

Over the years Arnold had become a fanatic. He was the Discoverer. He and he alone had been privileged to witness the birth of the funnel. From lecturing to old ladies, he travelled the earth lecturing to crowds in packed halls, his importance growing with the menace, so that he became a slave to the ogre he had witnessed.

He grew a saintly beard and founded a Gospel. God had brought about this thing in order to punish the world, and He had seen fit to reveal it to him, the Chosen One. He, Grierson, would convert the penitent before it was too late. Let they that would be saved rally to him in the name of the Lord.

Many followed him to the hills.

When he heard of the H-bomb plan he was furious. Didn't the fools realise that they would blow up Heaven? Wasn't it obvious that since God had sent the anti-gravity beam it must lead to His Kingdom?

Accompanied by a few followers, Arnold tried to break into the enclosure where the bombs were being assembled in readiness for feeding into the funnel. They came bearing white flags and banners inscribed "Surrender to God," "Prepare For Thine End."

In the untouched corners of the world viewers watching the assembling of the bombs saw Arnold march onto their television screens. They remembered how, as a clerk, he had kept silent about the menace for twenty seven months. Something might have been done to stop it in those early stages before it got a proper hold. At least the scientists would have had more time in which to act. Their tolerance of Arnold changed to hate. They marched from their homes and demonstrated against him in countless public squares and thoroughfares, and when mass frenzy and hysteria had done its work those nearest to the scene converged on the vast arms dump of Operation Saviour.

In silent accord they seized him, and broke down the gates

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and dragged him to the perimeter of anti-gravity and flung him into the funnel.

The H-bombs followed, one by one, their delicate instruments passing information from one to the other via the intermediate satellites, back to the tracking stations, the whole unseen procession streaking along the gravity beam, instruments of death engaged in life-saving work at last.

Or were they indeed about to blow up Heaven, as Arnold Grierson had said ?

Months went by, and the dwindling stocks of H-bombs were fed into a funnel that now had London in its grip and was taking in the coast of Europe and of Ireland. Uninterrupted signals came down the space-chain from the leading bomb, fifty million, a hundred, two hundred million miles away and speeding faster and faster so that imagination shied. When would it strike ? Would it ever strike ? Had it after all gone into some distant orbit, round and round like a merry-go-round while the world died ?

Meanwhile, a new threat became evident. People grew breathless and easily exhausted. The funnel had become so powerful that it was sucking air into itself. Slowly, the atmosphere was being drained from the globe. Folk lay gasping in the streets. Old people died and young lungs spurted blood as children played. Nor was that all. The thinning of the atmosphere made the sun's rays more powerful, so that places that had rarely risen much above freezing point now sweltered in tropical temperatures, and ice-caps began to melt, with the certainty of more flooded continents.

In the tracking stations sleepless men strained at their apparatus while four thousand H-bombs and a like number of satellites raced through the blackness of space.

At four o'clock on the morning of October the 18th, 2001, a duty tracker in an Italian observatory reported a cessation of signals radiated from H-bomb One. Other stations rushed to confirm. It did not need confirmation. Proof was there for all to see in the outside world.

Gravity had returned to the earth.

And in all the world there was no nuclear weapon. They had all exploded far away in the realms of space.

So that for those that were left, Heaven *was* Earth.

Harold Parsons

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Another humorous story in that unusual human alien alliance known as "Creatures, Incorporated," (the previous story, under that title, appeared in the June issue). This month Webley and Grant have a more difficult task than finding an alien accommodation.

ALIEN FOR HIRE

by LARRY MADDOCK

Webley is a sometimes thing ; a creature without form or shape of his own. During the course of our acquaintance he has favoured the guise of a cat—a most handsome feline, I might add, with an air of the sophisticate about him—but it's hard to tell from one day to the next what shape might strike his fancy at any time. To further complicate matters, Webley is a most accomplished telepath.

At the moment he was lounging cat-fashion on one corner of my desk, apparently engrossed in thoughts of his own, while a dark beauty named Nancy Rhodes was briefing me on her qualifications as a secretary.

" And so," she continued, " when they told me at the employment office that you wanted a girl who was surprised at nothing, I decided I just *had* to apply for the job."

" Miss Rhodes," I said, " Creatures, Incorporated is a—shall we say—complicated business. As you know, we're the

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only travel agency on Earth that deals exclusively with alien beings—creatures from a variety of planets and a variety of cultures. You must be diplomatic and understanding with them all, no matter what they look like or remind you of. Do you still still think you'd like the job ?"

" Yes," she said, " I do."

It would, I thought, be nice having her around the office, if only for decoration, but I reminded myself that Creatures, Incorporated couldn't afford decorations that might be apt to panic when a Callistan vampire, for instance, sidled through the door in search of travel accommodations.

" Do you mind if I give you a little test ?" I asked.

" Not at all," the girl replied.

" All right. Suppose," I said, " that my cat here, Webley by name, was not really a cat. Suppose he was an alien who was asking about hotel accommodations. What would be the first thing you would do ?"

Nancy looked critically at the cat. Webley, of course, is not a cat ; he just looks like one. I could see from her expression that she was thinking deeply on the problem.

" Does he speak English ?" she wanted to know.

" Of course," said Webley, stretching himself and yawning in a most convincing cat-manner. " Seventeen other languages, too."

If the girl was surprised it didn't show. " A remarkable cat," she observed. " He wants a hotel room ?"

" That's right."

" I think I'd ask him to sit down while I checked to see what was available."

Webley rolled over on his back and his legs disappeared. In less time than it takes to describe it, Webley was a smooth, featureless ball of fur, rolling across the desk towards Nancy Rhodes.

With commendable aplomb she picked him up and cradled him in her lap. " I don't know what I'd do," she admitted. " Without legs, he couldn't very well sit down, could he ? It's something you'd have to play by ear. But Mr. Grant, aren't most of the creatures you do business with fairly well known ? I mean, how often do you run up against a totally new species?"

Webley was having fun. While she was speaking he had changed into a snake and slithered off her lap onto the floor. The girl watched him closely as he disappeared under the desk. " Just what is he, anyway ?" she asked.

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" He's a Webley," I told her. " He's also my partner, and," I added, " if you want the job, he's one-half of your boss. Okay, Webley ?"

" Sure," came a voice from under the table. " She'll be a nice addition to our staff."

Nancy Rhodes was twenty-two years old and possessed, in addition to a delightful figure and an an exceedingly pretty face, a good head for business. Moreover, she and Webley seemed to hit it off right from the start, and I could see that the three of us would make an excellent team.

Miss Rhodes was the fifteenth applicant we had interviewed in the space of one week, and was the first of the lot to show any promise at all. The others had been ill-at-ease, squeamish, horrified or anxious to depart when we tried to ascertain the extent of their shock-proof qualities.

Creatures, Incorporated was now three months old, and thanks to Webley's talents as a telepath and linguist, had prospered steadily since the incident of the captured Queegle. The strangeness of being in a business partnership with a creature from another world had worn off and now our friendship seemed as natural as it would have been had we grown up together.

Nancy Rhodes, we learned, was a girl who thoroughly enjoyed being different, and so she fitted our organization perfectly ; Webley and I are about as different as anybody could ever hope to be. In fact; if it hadn't been for the fair Miss Rhodes, Creatures, Incorporated might still be only a travel agency.

Nancy had worked for us for about three weeks when the Kabobra squeezed his feathered bulk into our office at the New York space-port. Webley and I were both occupied elsewhere —trying to convince the Statler-Hilton hotel chain that they needed our services, to be exact—so Nancy was left in charge of the office.

According to Nancy, the Kabobra wriggled through our oversize doorway and asked for me by name. It seems that Cholly Emlach, a friend I had been developing at the Martian embassy, had sent him over. Nancy told the oversize bird-thing that I was out, but was expected back momentarily.

Now, a Kabobra is about eight feet tall and has a thirty-foot wingspread. In the strictest sense of the word, a Kabobra is not exactly a bird, as the females suckle their young ; nor is it

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a true mammal, as its young are hatched from eggs, not born. It isn't quite as confused a creature as the native Earth platypus however, which has a duck bill, lays eggs, suckles its young, carries them in a marsupial pouch, grows fur and swims with webbed feet. In fact, alongside a platypus, the Kabobra is a fairly orthodox creature. It goes without saying that they are highly intelligent, too.

" I am named Johrkoll," the bird-creature told her. " I am a Kabobra."

" Yes, I know," Nancy replied, quite thrilled at handling an alien interview on her own hook. Fortunately, the Kabobra are a fairly well-known race, although there had been only four of them to visit Earth before Johrkoll's arrival. Johrkoll had taken the trouble of learning English from an out-planet trader before making the trip to Earth, so she didn't need Webley around to translate.

Nancy, of course, assumed the strange creature was in search of travel or hotel accommodations, as that was the advertised business of Creatures, Incorporated, and asked if she could be of any help in my absence.

The bird-thing whistled through its nostrils (the Kabobra equivalent of a friendly smile) and asked her if she could find it a job.

" I don't know," she said, the idea fascinating her. " What can you do ?"

Johrkoll fluttered his giant wings, creating a small breeze in the office. " I fly," he said simply. " And, of course, on my planet I'm considered quite a good singer," he added with commendable modesty.

" Sing to me," she said. " Would you ?"

The Kabobra opened his beak, threw back his head, and five show windows in the space-port bazaar collapsed into tinkling shards.

Nancy sat there looking expectant for several moments before saying, " Pardon me, Mr. Johrkoll, but I don't hear a thing."

Johrkoll looked at her, whistled several short blasts, and explained sadly, " My singing voice is several octaves above your hearing range. I'm afraid that on Earth I wouldn't do too well as a singer."

" Mr. Johrkoll," Nancy said, " I hope you'll excuse my ignorance in these matters, but, well, you know, different

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creatures have different taboos, and I hope I'm not treading on your toes, but would you have any objection to someone riding on your neck while you're flying ?"

The Kabobra whistled good-naturedly. " Of course not. Why should I ?"

" Just checking," she said. " How soon do you need this job ?"

" As quickly as you people can find one for me," he replied.

" Have you looked for employment anywhere else ?"

" Yes," he admitted, " but to no avail. It seems there are too many technical and legal difficulties involved when it comes to hiring individuals not born, hatched or spawned on Earth. On top of that," he added helplessly, dipping his wings in a gesture of frustration, " I've lost my passport and all my money. A gentleman at the Martian embassy suggested that I try you people. ' If Creatures, Incorporated can't fix you up,' he said, ' no one can.' I hope his high regard for you is not unwarranted."

" Hmmm," Nancy said, her mind working furiously. " I'm sure we can help you—but I'm not sure exactly how. Social Security, union membership, security investigations and all that, you know. You don't even have a birth certificate, do you ?"

" I was hatched," he informed her.

" Well then," she said, " the only thing I can suggest right now is to wait for Mr. Grant and his partner to return—and in the meantime I'll take down as much information as we have."

Johrkoll agreed to Nancy's suggestion, and by the time Webley and I arrived at the office they had prepared a fairly complete resume.

Nancy explained the situation as briefly as she could, stressing particularly Cholly Emlach's confidence that if we couldn't do it, no one could. It was a challenge, all right—and at the same time one of the luckiest things that had ever happened to us.

Creatures, Incorporated had never faced the problem of finding a job for an alien before ; our specialty was hotel rooms and transportation facilities. There had to be a way, I told myself, to lick this problem. Webley, who had unobtrusively been listening to my thoughts, nodded in agreement.

Webley, incidentally, reads everybody's mind—including aliens. This is how he can learn a strange language almost

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immediately ; he literally digs meanings out of the alien's mind. Webley was born on a planet some six light years from Earth —a planet, he says, called Webley. Although I have asked him a time or two for a more detailed description of his home, he's rather close-mouthed about his former life. I suspect that he's hiding an unsavory past, but so far our relationship has been entirely satisfactory, so I'm not overly concerned about what he once was.

More important than the mystery of Webley's origin, however, was the problem of finding a job for the Kabobra.

But how? The main hitch seemed to be the damnable number of official papers that had to be filled out by anyone seeking employment, and the number of documents needed to verify each statement.

Johrkoll had none of the necessary documents. As far as I could tell, there wasn't even any way to prove he was who he claimed to be. Privately, I doubted if we could do anything for him at all. The more I thought about it, the bigger the obstacles seemed to grow, until I could visualize the need for an Act of Congress to get the poor Kabobra a job. Even then, there was no guarantee that anyone would hire him.

" Webley," I said. " Any ideas ?"

Webley shook his head. He looked at the Kabobra, sighed most unhappily, and said, " He's too big."

" Too big for what ?"

" For stealing. Now when *I* was a bird—"

" Please," I said, wincing at the memory of how we had acquired our original capital, " confine your suggestions to practical, honest ideas."

" Just reminiscing," he said.

Nancy spoke up. " How about the machine ?"

Webley immediately probed her mind and extracted the whole idea in three seconds. He smiled, yawned, and laid his head on his paws, a signal that as far as he was concerned the problem was solved.

Unfortunately, I am neither telepathic nor quite that quick at assimilating information.

" Machine ?" I said.

" Sure," Nancy replied. The one fault I can see in Miss Rhodes is her tendency to become animately incoherent the moment she gets excited about an idea.

" You told me yourself that the machine was on record as the only accepted device for making sure an alien is telling the

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truth—and after all, that's what all these missing documents are for. And since Webley's really the machine and you're practically a Doctor of Alien Semantics all Johrkoll has to do is dictate the documents he needs and everything is okay. No ?" See what I mean ?

I mulled it over. Perhaps I should explain that when Webley and I first went into business as Creatures, Incorporated we built a fake Hieronymous machine to conceal Webley's telepathic talents. The device had so impressed the scientists who saw it in operation, and officialdom in general, that now, in the United Government's records, there was a very official paper stating that our Hieronymous machine was the only means yet discovered of establishing instant contact with a totally new species, and that this selfsame machine was accurate in every respect.

We had told Nancy about the incident with the Queegle and revealed to her the true nature of the machine after Webley had probed her mind and decided she could be trusted.

" Hmmm," I said. It was becoming my favourite expression of late.

There was virtue to her idea, of course. Webley had picked the whole concept out of her mind at once and seemed satisfied. I mulled it over for several minutes without spotting any major flaws.

All we would have to do would be to obtain blank documents, ask Johrkoll the proper questions, have Webley do a running telepathic check on his answers, and fill in the blanks. Then, of course, the next step would be to get the sprawling bureaucracy under which we lived to accept our " proof " as official. I had my doubts.

" It's worth a try, anyway," I said.

I called my fellow cat-lover, Professor Nelson at New York University, and outlined the plan, asking him for suggestions as to whom to consult in the government. He thought the idea praiseworthy and referred me to a friend of his in the political science department, who, he assured me, was acquainted with some pretty powerful bureaucratic wheels. About six phone calls later I was talking to a certain Delegate Underhill, who, one of Nelson's friends' friends had said, would be able to help us if only I mentioned his name.

" Delegate Underhill ?" I said, as his florid face appeared in the viewscreen. " I'm calling you at the suggestion of Paul Schmenkopf."

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Underhill was immediately alert and very anxious to find out what he could do for me. I explained what I needed and asked if he had any ideas. On impulse, I mentioned that if it should take an act of the General Assembly it would most surely be known as the Underhill Alien Orientation Act, or some such. I could see that the idea appealed to him.

" Yes, yes," he agreed, and then used my favourite expression, " hmmm." I was glad to see that I didn't have a monopoly on it.

" How soon," he asked, " do you need action on this ?"

" Immediately. Paul said you were the one man who could do it."

Underhill was flattered, and obviously would move heaven and earth for the sake of Paul Schmenkopf's approval. " I can get it through as a rider this week," he said, " by taking advantage of some political favours I have outstanding. It would be much simpler, however, if you, as a corporation, were to take the responsibility yourself for hiring these aliens—then everything would be adequately centralized and the State Department would be satisfied. After all, you say you are the sole owners of the only device in the world which can verify the statement of an alien."

The possibilities inherent in such a situation must have occurred to Webley and me at the same instant, for he immediately assumed a far-off expression.

" But," I said, " if we hire them, what will we do with them —rent them out to people who can use their services ?"

" Son," Underhill remarked, " you should have been in politics with a mind like that. I'll include renting the aliens to other businessmen as your intention when I present the bill to the Assembly, if that will be satisfactory to you."

I looked at Webley. He, always quick to smell a potential profit, nodded enthusiastically.

" That would be fine," I said.

" All right. I'll have it drawn up and call you back for final approval. And—oh—" Underhill smiled most ingratiatingly, " give my regards to Paul when you see him."

" I'll do that, sir—and thank you very much."

"My pleasure, Mr. Grant. Any friend of Paul's, you know."

I gave him our number and broke the connection. Then I grinned rather stupidly and said in my most pontifical manner, " Hmmmm."

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After that, everything happened at once. Webley shouted, " Wheee !"; Johrkoll whistled with delight; and Nancy kissed me most vigorously on the mouth. I kissed back.

" My dear Miss Rhodes," I said at last, " I'm tempted to make you a junior partner."

" Oh, Mister Grant !" she said.

" As a matter of fact, I'm just tempted—"

" Please !" said Webley. " On company time ?"

Nancy went back to her typewriter while I looked studiously at some papers on my desk. *Sometimes*, I thought loudly, looking directly at Webley, *I resent your being a telepath.*

" So now," I said aloud, " we're in business. From travel agency to employment agency in one easy lesson."

" Not employment agency," Nancy corrected. " *Employer.*"

" So we are," I admitted. " Well, Johrkoll, you came here looking for an employer who could hire you, and it looks as if you've come to the right place. Miss Rhodes, you said you had an idea how to put our friend to work ?"

" Yes," she said. " He'd make a wonderful ride. He says he wouldn't object to it, either."

As I pointed out earlier, Nancy tends to become incoherent when she's sold on an idea. " Would you mind amplifying that statement ?" I asked politely.

She grinned. " Kids," she said. " At an amusement park. ' Step right up young man and ride the giant bird—only fifty cents for three full minutes in the air !' That kind of a ride."

" Oh," I said, the idea sinking in and triggering visions of all sorts of financial gain for Creatures, Incorporated. " Miss Rhodes, if you will get together with our newest employee and prepare the necessary documents. While Webley checks the truthfulness of his statements, I'll get on the phone and see if I can make a deal with some old friends I used to have at Coney Island."

Marty Peterson, a fast man with a buck in anybody's language, was quick to see the advantages of running the world's first Kabobra ride. I made him agree that Johrkoll would have a ten minute break every hour and an hour off for lunch, and then we started talking money. I'm developing quite a fondness for talking money.

It took Marty less than a half hour to make it to the office, and when he had his first good look at the giant bird-thing he

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went into an ecstasy of delight, and it was some minutes before we could get him to talk of anything other than harness and saddle arrangements to fit on the Kabobra's neck. Finally, however, all the details of the transaction were agreed upon to everyone's satisfaction and the two of them left the offices of Creatures, Incorporated in high spirits.

Webley, Nancy and I sat back in a happy stupor and waited for our next client. It was easy to see that there would be many good days ahead.

" Webley," I said, after a thoughtful look in Nancy's direction, " would you mind going out for a bottle with which to celebrate our good fortune ?"

" Why me ?" he wanted to know.

" I think," Nancy said, smiling mysteriously, " that Mr. Grant would like to make me a junior partner while you're gone."

Larry Maddock.

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

With that long-awaited 100th issue looming nearer (and an all-star cast of authors lining up) the two preceding issues are likely to suffer by comparison. Although not necessarily so. It is merely that editorially we are so involved with No. 100 that the preceding issues only *seem* insignificant. Next month has some better-than-average stories to offer in the shape of three long stories : " The Best Possible World " a new and hitherto unpublished story by American author Richard Wilson ; " Theory " by John Rackham, involving a human diagnosis system for the crews of a star-drive ship ; and " The Doorway " by Australian Wynne N. Whiteford, evolving round an alien matter distributor.

There will be at least one short story—" Test Case " by Donald Malcolm centred around the legal aspect of the first man to land on the Moon. Plus, of course, the conclusion of Kenneth Bulmer's fine serial " The Fatal Fire," which is packed with surprises and a complete change of scene.

Story rating for No. 93 were :

1. X For Exploitation (Part 2) - - Brian W. Aldiss
2. The Fourth Power - - - - - John Brunner
3. Man Of War - - - - - - - E. C. Tubb
4. The Jarnos Affair - - - - - Lan Wright

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Now that Man is breaking the confining shackles of gravity, at least with space probes, the science of astronomy is rapidly beginning to expand its boundaries. Particularly within our Solar System. And coming up with some surprising new information.

SPACE TODAY

by KENNETH JOHNS

Advances in one science very often break the ground for another science so that workers in other fields can probe forward past the frontiers of the known and enter realms which, until the breaking process, were closed to them. Already the new concept of great rivers of high speed particles surging backwards and forwards around the Earth—the Van Allen belts—(discussed in *New Worlds* No. 95) has been extended to an important advance in astronomy. What at first seemed of interest mainly from the specialised viewpoint of space enthusiasts and physicists is being actively studied by meteorologists, radio engineers and astronomers.

The new discoveries have been recently used to explain why the Sun has a corona, that strange thin outer atmosphere which is apparently at a temperature of up to millions of degrees Centigrade although the Sun's surface is at a mere 6,000°C.

Professors Kellogg and Ney of the University of Minnesota advance the theory that the Sun has its own Van Allen belts ; but on a vaster and grander scale, dwarfing the terrestrial ones. In fact, the radiation belts above the Earth should be thought of as being the Earth's corona.

The temperature of a gas is really an indication of its average kinetic energy, so a stream of fast moving particles can be considered to have a high temperature, although it has not the random velocity characteristic of thermal movement. Many methods have established that the particles making up the Sun's corona have very high energies and, until now, this was taken

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as an indication of high random velocities. All the methods of temperature and velocity measurement depend upon analysis of the light from, or passing through, the corona, and, to some extent, the radio waves it emits. The corona contains some heavy atoms and since these become more and more ionised by the loss of electrons as the temperature rises, the light characteristics of these ionisation states is a good indication of their temperature.

But particles such as protons and electrons accelerated to high speeds and trapped in a magnetic field will also ionise atoms by collision, and then the degree of ionisation depends upon the energy of the particle streams.

Professors Kellogg and Ney suggest that there is one source of all these high speed particles, a solar source, that injects them into the Van Allen belts of both the Sun and the Earth. The energy to sustain the particles at high speed and to replace their energy lost by radiation could come from hydromagnetic effects of turbulence in the outer part of the Sun or from sound waves generated by the uprising columns of gas that show up as granules on the Sun's surface. The energy input into the corona must be enormous since the total energy of the corona has to be replaced every thirty hours.

The changing magnetic fields around sunspots and the 11-year sunspot cycle will make the Van Allen solar belts far more complicated than those of Earth ; but this new picture of the Sun's atmosphere does help to explain the changes in brightness and shape of the corona. At times of sunspot maximum the corona is bright and spherical whilst at sunspot minimum it is dimmer and extends far outwards over the equator, the changes probably being due to a weaker solar magnetic field and less particles being injected into the belts at sunspot minimum.

We are still waiting to see whether the terrestrial Van Allen belts change in shape and intensity as the present sunspot maximum declines.

The new picture also explains why the corona radiates more infrared light than could be explained by the old theory ; fast electrons emit long wave synchroton radiation when passing through a magnetic field.

The last solar eclipse on 2nd October, 1959 saw scientists busy checking on the Van Allen belts of the Sun by careful measurements of the Solar Corona spectra and for any sign of a maximum in corona brightness just above the surface of the Sun.

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If old Sol's faint magnetic field can whip up 5 million degree Centigrade particles, interstellar travellers had better be wary when approaching hotter stars, particularly those with magnetic fields a thousand more times stronger than the Sun's.

Another new and startling idea, to explain the expansion of the Universe, has been developed by Raymond Lyttleton and Hermann Bondi. The expansion was first deduced in 1928 from the shift towards the red end of the spectrum of light from distant galaxies. Lyttleton and Bondi are exponents of the theory of the continuous creation of matter holding that hydrogen atoms are continuously appearing throughout the Universe. Since hydrogen is by far the commonest element, they considered what factor of hydrogen could cause galaxies to flee one another—and came up with an original theory.

They postulate of a hydrogen atom that the positive charge of the proton nucleus does not exactly balance the negative charge of the electron. The difference need only be minute. Two parts in a million million million is sufficient to explain the recession of the galaxies—and hence the expansion of the Universe.

With the positive charge slightly greater than the negative, each galaxy will act as a positive unit, and like charges repel. Electrostatic repulsion rules the macrocosmos just as inflexibly as it does in the familiar experiment of the behaviour of two charged pith balls.

The effect is not felt inside galaxies, for here there is sufficient ionisation to allow space to conduct electrons so that the interior of galaxies becomes electrostatically neutral—the positive charge builds up on the outside of the galaxies. Inside galaxies, heat, gravity, magnetism and light pressure are the vital structural factors.

Lyttleton and Bondi expanded their theory to include cosmic rays, the high speed positively charged nuclei, mainly hydrogen, that race through space. These, they say, are expelled from galaxies by the like galactic positive charge.

Einstein's General Theory of Relativity is one of the cornerstones of modern cosmology, therefore proof as to its observational validity is very important. Various scientists have recently suggested using the new tools, such as space probes, satellites and atomic clocks, to test it. Einstein pointed out three tests of his theory. The first, the bending of light by massive bodies such as stars, has been checked seven times and was found to be correct to within an error of 10%.

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The second has been observed but not measured. It is the gravitational red shift where a photon loses energy as it struggles up out of a gravity field and so becomes redder as its wavelength increases. Conversely, light has a violet shift as it falls into a gravity field, so light from the Sun is first reddened and then given a slight violet shift as it escapes from the Sun and reaches Earth. Earth's gravity is so much weaker than the Sun's that this violet shift is only a three thousandth of the red shift, too small to measure with visible light.

The ideal way of testing this would be with a white dwarf star ; as we haven't one conveniently on hand, physicists have suggested measuring the change in wavelength of very short radio waves. The effect should just be measureable by using a satellite as far from Earth as possible, broadcasting with an extremely accurate transmitter.

The third test was the change in the perihelion of Mercury. Mercury moves around the Sun in an ellipse and the ellipse also swings around the Sun at 43 seconds of arc per century. This was explained by Einstein and his calculations fit in neatly with observations. However, there is another type of perihelion change that is too small to measure with the existing planets and satellites of the solar system ; but which should be observable with an artificial satellite.

Thirring and Lense deduced from Einstein's theory that a rotating planet or star should shift the perihelion of its satellites, the prime mover being the gravitational force set up by a spinning body. The Sun's effect on Mercury would be only 0.01 seconds of arc per century ; the Earth's effect on the Moon's perigee would be 0.06 seconds of arc per century—but it would be 50 seconds of arc per century on an artificial satellite orbiting the Earth every ninety minutes. Small as it is, this perigee change could be measured accurately, particularly with modern radio tracking methods.

Einstein always held that light moved through space at a velocity independent of that of its source ; but Ritz postulated that light had a speed constant only in respect to its source. Which of these ideas is correct has yet to be proved ; but this one and Einstein's idea that all electromagnetic radiation travels through space at exactly the same velocity could be checked by the suggestion of Dr. Teller, the American H-bomb physicist.

Teller proposes that a nuclear warhead be sent out as the payload of a space probe and be exploded about 100 million

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miles away in space. Measurement of the time or arrival of the radio, infrared, visible, ultraviolet, X-rays and gamma rays would enable their relative speeds to be measured, whilst a really high speed probe would check on the effect of velocity of the source.

Although this H-bomb would be used for something more useful than the current crop, the experiment remains crude. It could easily contaminate the Solar System before all the work necessary has been carried out, and it would be far better to contain ourselves in patience for a short time longer until larger probes have been developed, probes capable of carrying intense radio, light and radiation sources.

Other experiments are queing up. An atomic clock accurate to 1 part in 100,000 million in a satellite with a highly elliptical orbit will settle once and for all the knotty problem of whether or not ' time ' does pass more slowly in a fast moving ship when compared with time on Earth.

It is interesting that W. Bonner has suggested that a body moving through a gravitational field will lose mass as it emits gravitational radiation travelling at the speed of light. His calculations show that the loss is too small to be detected by present day methods.

And, in step with these new ideas, within the solar system modern techniques are probing away exploring the planets. Russian observations of Mars at the November, 1958 opposition showed that the planet was still obscured by the great dust storms seen at the time of closest approach in 1956. American astronomers bounced radar waves from Venus in February, 1958, using 265 kilowatt pulses. They then spent months patiently decoding and distinguishing their 2 millisecond pulses from the general background ' noise,' using an IBM computer to show a correlation between outgoing and received signals five minutes later. For this work they used a crystal maser cooled in liquid helium to amplify the faint signals without introducing electron ' noise.' The experiment will be repeated in September, 1959, when Venus is close again, in an attempt to measure accurately the distance from Earth to Venus.

And so it goes on. With the new tools, the present day concept of astronomy and of spatial exploration is a suddenly new and enormously exciting field of human endeavour. And still this is only the beginning.

Kenneth Johns

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Here is a further George Whitley 'time-twister' (remember his "Homing Tantalus" last month ?) and if you think his 'light-jammer' spaceship is pseudo-scientific check the facts in this month's article by Kenneth Johns.

NO RETURN

by GEORGE WHITLEY

"So we're back," said Horwitz, staring out of the port towards the great, slowly expanding globe that was the Moon.

"Almost," qualified Mercer.

Almost, he thought. Almost—but there's no telling if and how the antic malice that seems, at times, to govern human affairs will strike. The interstellar drive has functioned better than its designers ever thought it would, but we have to make these final evolutions on rocket power. Sure, the rockets have been tested—but that proves only that they were functioning properly at the time of the test. It's all of ten months subjective—damn' nearly six years objective, if that makes any difference—since they were last used, and . . .

He grinned, thinking that his formless fears had reached an utterly absurd pitch of morbidity. And then, he told himself, there'll be the trip by shuttle down from orbit to Lunar Quarantine—and what if the shuttle cracks up ? And what if an unscheduled meteor shower hits the station while we're there, anyhow ? Then there'll be the short hop back to Earth by Lunar Ferry ; and the ferry rockets have been known to come to grief . . .

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His grin was wider. And come to that, he thought, every atomic power station on Earth might decide to go out of control at once, or the Sun might go nova.

And yet, at the back of his mind, there was still the vague, uneasy doubt, the chilling foreboding.

"What's the joke?" asked Horwitz.

"Nothing, Captain."

"Don't tell me you've waited all this time to go space-nutty."

"Hardly. It's just that I was . . . thinking . . ."

"Thinking of the Deep Freeze, huh?" The Captain's seamed, leather face broke into the grimace that was the nearest he ever allowed himself to a smile. "Frankly, I've been having a few thoughts about it myself. It was the only way they could ever have got a crew for this expedition—the kind of crew they wanted, that is. Join the Space Service and see the Universe. Only married men need apply. But to ask a married man to take the first interstellar ship way out to the Centaurian System, ageing perhaps two years during the voyage and returning to find his wife twelve years older—that would have been too much. And so our everloving brides slumber on in suspended animation, waiting for the kiss of the Fairy Prince to awaken them." He chuckled. "To use one of your technicalities, Mercer, delete 'fairy.'"

"Deleted," agreed the journalist.

He swivelled in his acceleration chair, looked around the big Control Room. All officers were at their stations, their separate attentions fixed on instruments that even now were something of a mystery to him. But, he thought, my concern is with men, not machines. Stories, whether fact or fiction, are about people, not about things. I know that Horwitz is going to throw the ship into orbit around the Moon and that in a very little time we shall see Earth coming up clear of the limb of that barren, gleaming world; and I know that that will be the closest we shall see Earth for some weeks. We shall tell the Quarantine boys that the Centaurian planets were all completely barren, completely sterile, but we shall still have to do our full six weeks in isolation. One thing about it, as far as I'm concerned I shall be able to get all my material shot through to Head Office during the waiting time, and once the Ferry sets us down at Port Woomera I need waste no more time before getting to the Deep Freeze as fast as strato-rocket will take me.

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The same applies to the others, of course, the spacemen and the scientists.

The Control Room was quiet now, save for the subdued whining and clicking of machinery and instruments. Mercer became aware that the ship was swinging, turning on her gyroscopes for a stern first approach. The pocked, shining face of the Moon slid from view, was replaced by blackness and the cold, gleaming stars.

"Stand by gyro controls," ordered Horwitz. "Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . seven . . . six . . . five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . *Cut* !"

"*Cut* !" echoed the Second Officer.

The personal touch, thought Mercer. All this could have been done by the automatics. But I mustn't complain. His personal touch got us there and has brought us back. Almost.

"Main interplanetary drive. Maximum thrust. Three seconds. *Fire* !"

"Fire !" came the Chief Officer's voice, the latter half of the word drowned by the snarling, screaming thunder of the rockets.

The giant whose name is Acceleration thrust Mercer deep into the padding of his chair, as suddenly released the pressure The journalist looked around him, saw officers busying themselves with instruments that even he knew were radar sets, with a huge mounted sextant. The Moon was visible again through the viewports, but the horizon in sight was not the one above which Earth would rise.

"Try the TV screen, Mercer," suggested Horwitz.

Mercer turned to look at the screen. The picture it presented was clear, detailed, but lacking, somehow, in reality. He saw the familiar globe of the home planet swim slowly over and clear of the serrated limb of her smaller sister. But he had not watched it at first hand and he felt somehow cheated.

There was a red carpet at Port Woomera, and there were bands, and there were high dignitaries from every nation on Earth. The Master of the Lunar Ferry brought his little ship in to an unspectacular routine landing—insofar as any rocket landing can be unspectacular—relaxed in his chair and watched through his control room viewports the preparations being made for the reception of his distinguished passengers.

He said to his Chief Officer, "I envy them the Centaurian Expedition, but not this . . ."

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Replied his second in command, " I hear that the speechifying and such is to be cut short. There's a strato-rocket ready to whisk them off to London at once, if not before. After all, it's two years since they've seen their wives, and there weren't any beautiful extra-Terran humanoids to make the trip interesting . . ."

" Twelve years," said the Captain.

" To us. I was swotting for the entrance examinations to the Academy when they shoved off. Twelve years us. Two years to them. No time at all to their women." He paused. " It does seem funny, though, all this tinkering with Time. It's really three different kinds of Time, not two. There's the Time that they've experienced, with their ship approaching the speed of light. There's the Time that we've experienced. And there's the Time that their wives have experienced. Or would that be a sort of Stasis ?"

" Or Biological Time, maybe," said the Captain. " H'm. They are cutting it short down there. Just a ceremonial glass of champagne with the big shots, a few brief words by Horwitz, and they're being hustled off to the strato-rocket. Nice to know that the authorities can be human sometimes . . ."

" Sometimes," grumbled the other. " It's high time that we were getting home to our wives."

" We haven't been to Far Centaurus," reproved the Captain.

There was more tension inside the pressure hull of the strato-rocket than there had been during the entire two year—or twelve year—voyage. I'll write about it all some day, thought Mercer. Not yet, but some day. Now it's all too . . . too immediate. But these hardboiled spacemen and scientists are like kids of eighteen hurrying to their first date. So, for that matter, am I. But I can see why they insist on only married men for Space. It's the married men who have somebody to come back to, who won't take needless risks ; risks that could cost not only their own lives but the lives of their shipmates and that could well mean the loss of the ship.

He looked out of the port but there was nothing to see but the almost featureless overcast, dazzling white under the rays of the sun, above which they were flying. It had been late afternoon when they had taken off from Port Woomera, but with the combined factors of their speed and the differential between Greenwich and South Australian Time it would be

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early afternoon when they arrived in London. Thought Mercer, I'm getting rather tired of these paradoxes involving Time.

"Not much longer," said Horwitz.

"No," agreed Mercer.

"But this is so damned *slow*," complained the Captain. "After all, when we've approached the speed of light—exceeded it, even, if you take our own cockeyed Subjective Time into account—to have to make the last leg of the journey in this . . . this . . ." He fumbled for words. "Flying snail," he achieved at last.

"She'll keep," said Mercer. "She'll keep. She's been keeping for twelve years. They all have. Quite a charming thought on somebody's part to let us do the awakening . . ."

"Do you suppose they're all right?" asked the Captain. "After all—twelve years. Could there have been any . . . any deterioration?"

"They'll be all right," the journalist assured him. "While we were still in Quarantine I had a long telephone conversation with Betty Sayers, one of our feature writers. She was only a kid when we shoved off—she must be pushing middle age now. She was telling me about the control. A girl of twenty five or so—no parents, just lost her husband—volunteered for the job. They brought her out of stasis a month back. Physically and mentally she was none the worse for it. If anything, she was better. The deep, long sleep had been good for her."

"Yes," said Horwitz. "They told us about her. But I'm pleased to hear it again from you. You people have a way of getting more information than this dished out to the public."

"We aren't always allowed to pass it on. But this I can pass on."

"Thanks. We're losing altitude now. We shall soon be under these damned clouds . . ."

Tendrils of mist whipped past the windows, were replaced by a grey opacity. The cabin lights came on and went off again as the aircraft broke through the ceiling. The subdued snarl of the rockets softened to a murmur. Europe was below them; the familiar coastline, Spain and Portugal and France and the off-lying islands to the westward, the islands to the larger of which they were falling rapidly.

The green of farmland and of parkland fell astern of them as the shining dome of the city expanded, the shining dome to the north and west of which were the smaller domes of the airport

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buildings. The aircraft shuddered as her braking jets came into operation, slowed to a stop, the airport directly beneath her, fell gently on her downward directed exhausts. With startling rapidity ants became people and beetles became vehicles, and they were down.

The journey from the airport to the Westminster Hospital took minutes only ; the crew of the starship were hustled into the underground railway station and into a special express, finding, when they arrived at Westminster Station, that the moving way from the platform to the Hospital basement had been cleared for their benefit. In the Hospital there were minimal formalities. Each of the men was shown to the cubicle in which his wife was waiting for him, each of them was shown the button that he was to press in the unlikely event of his requiring any assistance, each was told that the process of re-animation was entirely automatic and had already been initiated.

Mercer stood in the centre of the room, bare except for the couch and the coffin—why must he think of it as that ? he asked himself—that stood along opposite walls. He stood and stared at the oblong, transparent box, the box in which the opaque vapours stirred sluggishly, thinning slowly, drawn away through inconspicuous ducts by an invisible fan.

Just an inert gas, he thought, and a field that is supposed to inhibit every biological function—that *does* inhibit every biological function—and the intensity of the field diminishing with every second so that by the time all the gas is gone she'll be only asleep, breathing normally, and all that I have to do will be to waken her. She'll remember our goodbye here, in this very room, but nothing more. (But has she dreamed, I wonder ?) She'll know nothing of the twelve years that have rolled over Earth in my absence ; not that I shall know much myself. It will be fun catching up on past history together. Not at once, of course. Not for a few weeks . . .

He smiled. He thought, I remember that she was rather reluctant to take the Deep Freeze treatment. She was always rather too conscious of the difference in our ages, thought that my absence would be a good chance to catch up with me. But I didn't fancy the idea of her having twelve years of experience without my being here to share it.

He could see her feet now. They were smaller than he had remembered them ; smaller, but not so slim, not so elegant. He

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thought wrily, this is where reality clashes with the idealised memory. After all, two years is a long time. Too long.

He could see her hair. It was not the deep auburn, with random strands of polished copper, that he remembered. It was gold rather than copper.

That damned gas, he thought. It was supposed to be inert, but it couldn't have been. It must have been a bleaching agent . . .

And then, seen dimly through the last of the thinning vapour, there was the rest of her—the legs neither long enough nor slim enough, the breasts too full, the neck too short and, framed by that wrong coloured hair, the face—beautiful but *wrong*—of a stranger.

There must have been some mistake, thought Mercer, walking rapidly to the door and to the bell push.

" There has been no mistake," said the white-coated Doctor.

" There has been no mistake," said the attractive, trimly uniformed nurse.

" There has been no mistake, Bill," said Betty Sayers.

" But there has," said Mercer hopelessly.

The girl, a robe round her now, was seated on the couch. She had been crying. She turned her tear-stained face to the others and said, brokenly, " There has been a mistake. This man is not my husband."

" But you are Mrs. Mercer. And this is Mr. Mercer."

" Look at these," flared Betty Sayers. " I brought them from the Morgue. Newspapers covering the few days prior to the setting off of the expedition. Look at this photograph. Is that *you*, Mrs. Mercer ?"

" It is, but . . ."

" And is that your husband ?"

" Yes, but . . ."

" And is that *you*, Bill ?"

" I suppose so."

" And is that your wife ?"

" No."

" Somebody," remarked Betty, " is crazy around here and I don't think it's me. As far as I know, every man jack of the Expedition but *you* has been re-united with his nearest and dearest. If it were only you, personally, involved I'd laugh it off as some form of space madness, but your wife as well ! It's too much. Look, Doctor, you were here when these women

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were put into stasis. I know that it was a long time ago, but you must remember them, and their husbands . . ."

"I do, Miss Sayers. I remember both Mr. and Mrs. Mercer quite well."

"So . . ."

"So he's not my husband," said the girl flatly. "He could be his twin brother, perhaps, but . . . Oh, the voice is a little different, and the face, and . . . And the *feel* of him. He's *wrong*, somehow . . ."

Mercer looked at Betty. He knew her of old—and *she* had not changed much during the years of his absence. There were added lines of experience on her thin face, but that was all ; but it was not her physical characteristics that concerned him. He knew of old her hunger for News, for a scoop. There was an avidity in her eyes that rather shocked him.

"Mrs. Mercer," she asked softly, "can you think of any proof, real proof ?"

"Perhaps," said the other woman slowly. "Bill has—had ? —a scar on his right shoulder. He could have had it removed but he preferred to keep it. He said that it was the decoration that he received for covering the Venusburg Riots . . ."

"The Venusburg Riots ?" echoed Mercer. "I can't remember . . ."

"I can," snapped Betty. "All of us can. And I can remember that scar of yours too—and how absurdly proud you always were of it. Take off your shirt, Bill."

"But . . ."

"Take it off. Let's see the famous scar again."

"But I never had any scar, and there never were any Venusburg Riots—not unless they happened while I was away." He unbuttoned his upper garment with fumbling fingers, pulled it away from his torso. "Look !"

"No scar," said Betty softly. "No scar—and a gap in the memory . . ." She began to speak louder. "A copy, an imitation, a good one—but not good enough. Let's get out of here Dr. Forbes—and you girls . . ."

"Betty ! Are you mad ?"

"No."

She put out her hand as he advanced towards her, pushed him with surprising strength. Caught off balance he staggered back, fell on to the couch. The others ran through the open door, slamming it after them. Mercer heard the click of the lock

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Mercer sat at the bar, his elbow on the sloppy woodwork, staring down at the fresh glass of whisky that the barman had shoved towards him. He had lost count of the number of drinks that he had downed. For all their effect they could have been water.

The Enquiry was over. All that remained now was for the big names in Physics to make some kind of sense of the evidence. Perhaps, thought Mercer, in a hundred or so years' time it will be possible to travel between the parallel worlds. Too late for me . . .

He thought, For the others it doesn't matter so much. They have their women, and if they are a little different from the way that they remember them it makes it all the more interesting for all parties. But for me, and for Marie, it is quite impossible. Far too much of Lynn rubbed off on me . . .

Trade was slack and the bartender was prepared to be conversational.

He said, " Funny business, that *Starseeker* enquiry . . ."

" Very funny," agreed Mercer.

" Odd, I mean. Very odd. Say, I thought that I recognised your face ! Aren't you the one that started all the flap ? William Mercer, the I.P.A. Correspondent ?"

" I am."

" Then you might be able to tell me just what it is all about." He placed a bottle on the bar. " This is on the house."

" Thanks," said Mercer, refilling his glass.

" Well—what did happen ?"

" The details of the Enquiry haven't been released yet."

" This will go no further," the barman assured him.

" Like hell it won't."

" It won't," said the barman definitely.

" What the hell does it matter, anyhow ?" said Mercer. " Damn it all—it's *my* story. Why shouldn't I tell it to whom I wish ?"

" Why shouldn't you ?" agreed the barman.

" It was a shock," said Mercer. " Two years away from Earth—and then to find that the everloving wife stashed away in the Deep Freeze wasn't my wife. It was a shock ; and then that silly bitch Betty Sayers had to jump to the conclusion that I was an alien spy, an android or humanoid robot made in the exact image of the real William Mercer. And there was that business of the Venusburg Riots, where I was supposed to have acquired a knife wound scar on the right shoulder . . ."

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" They were bad, those Venusburg Riots," said the barman. " They went to show just what beasts the lack of a drink makes of men."

" So I gathered. But I wasn't there. Well, I was *there*, but not *then*. Does that make any sense ?"

" Frankly," said the barman, " it doesn't."

" All right. I'll start at the beginning. I'll start at the time when I went into the cubicle to wake my wife from Stasis and found that she wasn't my wife at all, and that I wasn't her husband. That started the fun and games. They didn't call the police out to capture me—they called out the military. Believe me, if I'd made one move that could have been construed as hostile it would have been the beginning of a full scale battle. A one sided one.

" They lugged me off, treating me as though I were a fused and armed fusion bomb. They weren't taking any chances, but they daren't be too rough. Needless to say, I was both pained and mistified. I seemed to be the only person who didn't know what it was all about.

" The first stage, as far as I was concerned, was a session of questioning, of cross examination to start with. Later there were drugs and hypnosis and lie detectors. If I'd been paid at my usual rates for my story every time that I told it I'd be a rich man now. But it was all free. Anyhow, they couldn't shake me. My name was William Mercer. I was employed by I.P.A. I had been Special Correspondent with the *Starseeker* expedition. And I'd never heard of the Venusburg riots.

" The second stage was medical. Old Professor Garrett, of the Institute of Extra-Terran Biology, gave me a thorough going over. I contributed enough samples of myself almost to build a fair sized android. At the finish of it all I heard Garrett tell General Soames that I was male, of Caucasian stock, about forty five years of age and undeniably human. I was relieved to hear that last—it's something that I've been inclined to doubt myself, once or twice.

" Then there was Dr. Frost, the dermatologist. He came into the picture to determine whether or not I'd ever undergone cosmetic surgery of the tissues of my right shoulder, to remove a scar. One and all were still harping on those blasted Venusburg Riots. He said definitely that I'd never had a scar there. I'd already told everybody that.

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" There was Dr. Meyer, the psychologist. There was more hypnosis, and word association tests, and those damned silly ink blots. Somehow Oedipus got dragged into it, and the death wish and all the other claptrap. But Meyer, too, said that I was human. By this time I was beginning to think that I was the only human present.

" The authorities even called in old Dr. Canon of the Universal Insurance Company. He examined me before *Starseeker* blasted off, Interplanetary Press took out a policy on my behalf. He had my file. According to that I had that blasted scar when he gave me the check-up. I haven't got it now.

" Finally there was Inspector Williams of the Fingerprint Bureau. As you know, all those in hazardous occupations, such as spacemen, have their prints on file for identification purposes in case of a really messy smash. As a sort of acting, temporary spaceman I'd complied with the regulation. And the prints on file tallied with those that Williams took of me."

" But just what were they driving at ?" asked the barman.

" I've already told you," said Mercer. " It seems that they got the idea—thanks to Betty Sayers—that I was some sort of alien spy, a copy of the real Bill Mercer, a good copy but not quite good enough. That idea took a lot of shaking, even though Captain Horwitz had reported that the Centaurian planets were absolutely devoid of life ; life as we know it or any other kind. The brass-hats were working themselves up into a screaming tizzy, getting ready to put the whole damned planet on a defense footing against the invaders from Outside. Luckily the Enquiry was taken out of their hands and conducted by the civil authorities. Mr. Justice Holmes presided. You know what he's like, of course ; a frosty faced old bastard, but just.

" For some reason they let me sit through it all in the Court; perhaps they thought that I would say or do something to betray myself. I was well watched and guarded. And I was as mystified as everybody else.

" The assorted quacks were called first. They all said their pieces, they all said that I was human, male, Caucasian and all the rest of it. The only one who refused to commit himself definitely was Meyer ; as well as being an orthodox Freudian he's done quite a deal of research on Rhinian lines. He

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admitted that he could *feel* there was something strange about me. He wouldn't go any further than that.

" Old Holmes kept harping on those Venusburg Riots and the scar that I should have, but don't. He'd got hold of all sorts of old photographs of me, from my wife as well as from other girls. They were all beach photographs. On all of them the scar was obvious.

" He called Winneck, one of the I.P.A. shutterbugs. He got the story of the riots from him. I was interested to learn what it was all about—it seems that the freighter *Venus Girl* made a harder landing than usual and smashed the Colony's liquor ration for the next six months. It must have been the last straw that broke the camel's back. Anyhow, Winneck said that he and I were on Venus to cover the opening of the new Red River Power Station. (I remember *that*.) We were on the spot when the riots started. I was supposed to have collected the knife wound when I was stopping a rioter from smashing Winneck's camera.

" And then Holmes called the *Starseeker* people.

" Benz was first ; he was Surgeon Commander. He had examined all of us from time to time. He did not remember ever having seen a scar on my right shoulder.

" Captain Horwitz was next in the box. The first thing that Holmes asked him was if he remembered the Venusburg Riots. The Old Man said that he didn't. Holmes suggested that he might have been away, running to the Outer Planets, when the Riots broke out. Horwitz asked him when the Riots did happen. The Judge told him. Horwitz looked surprised and told Holmes that at that time he was on the Earth-Venus run and had been, in fact, Master of *Venus Girl*. Holmes was amazed that he did not recall the crash that smashed the cargo of booze, that sparked the whole thing off. Horwitz retorted that it would be the sort of thing that a shipmaster would remember, if it happened, and added that *Venus Girl* was always a bitch to handle in an atmosphere and that it was more by good luck than good judgment that he'd never pranged her.

" Holmes pondered this, then switched to a fresh track. ' Captain Horwitz,' he said, ' I'm going to ask you some personal questions. How have your relations with your wife been since your return from the Centaurian System ?'

" The Old Man replied, ' Normal, I guess. A spaceman home after a two year absence—and no women on the trip either . . .'

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" Holmes asked, ' So there was no trouble in adjusting physically ?'

" Horwitz said that there hadn't been.

" ' And psychologically ?' pressed Holmes.

" That had Horwitz rather worried. He said, as nearly as I can remember, 'Funny that you should ask that, Your Honour. It's something that Mrs. Horwitz and I didn't notice at first. After all, as far as she's concerned there was no time lag at all between my departure and my return. But now . . . How shall I put it ? It's as though we've got out of phase, somehow . . .' And then he went on to tell the Judge about the different memories of little things, about the aquarium of Venusian rainbow fish that he could remember and that his wife couldn't, about the Venusian silk underwear that she swore that he'd brought her home on his last trip from Venus, just prior to his taking the course in Interstellar Navigation at the Academy.

" Then Dr. Erikson was called. He had to tell the Judge all about the Erikson Drive—how it works, and why . . ."

" And how does it work ?" asked the barman.

" You've heard of the old windjammers," said Mercer. " The oldtime sailing ships. Well, a ship fitted with Erikson Drive is a lightjammer. Anti-gravity washes out inertia and the huge, plastic sails catch the light and the ship just bowls along before the photon gale. The outfit of sails is rather complicated so that the ship can be steered, can sail close hauled, run free and all the rest of it. It can't be used inside a planetary system, of course—but a lightjammer just uses her rockets to get well north or south of the Plane of the Ecliptic and then breaks out her wings . . ."

" And is it true that you exceed the speed of light ?" asked the barman.

" That was one of the questions that the judge asked Erikson," said Mercer. " And when Erikson answered it, all hands got involved in a fine tangle with the different kinds of Time. As you know, to an observer on Earth our round voyage took twelve years, and only six months of that time were spent exploring the Centaurian planets. To us, with our Subjective Time, the round voyage took only two years . . .

" Anyhow, old Holmes tired of Physics in the end and called Meyer back. He instructed him that he was to examine every member of the *Starseeker* expedition, and all their wives. The

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sitting of the Court was adjourned until this could be carried out, and I was returned to my quite palatial cell. I spent the two weeks or so of waiting in reading, in catching up with past history. Yes, I read all about the Venusburg Riots. It was strange to look at articles in old news magazines that were signed with my name and which I knew that I had never written.

" The Enquiry was opened again, and Meyer was the first witness called. I shall never forget the sensation in Court when Holmes asked Meyer what were his conclusions. Meyer huffed and puffed a little, then said, " It is my conclusion that all these men are aliens.'

" ' The spearhead of an alien invasion ?' asked Holmes. ' Should not steps be taken to incarcerate them all, even to dispose of them all at once ?'

" ' The men are alien only in a limited sense,' said Meyer. ' They are displaced persons, although the only one really aware of his displacement is the unfortunate William Mercer. But they are human, and they are the spacemen, scientists and technicians that they purport to be.'

" Holmes told him that he was talking in riddles, and Meyer, rather huffily, told Holmes that he, Meyer, was a physician and not a physicist.

" Holmes told him that he was still talking in riddles."

" And for my money," said the barman, " he was doing just that. Tell me, just what was the answer ?"

" I'm not a physicist either," said Mercer, " but this seems to have been the way of it. There have been, as we all know, many crucial points in history—and for every such crucial point there is a parallel world. There is, I imagine, a world in in which the Spanish Armada was successful, a world in which Napoleon was never defeated, a world in which Hitler won the Second World War. Of more immediate concern, there is a world in which the Venusburg Riots never happened. Such a world must be very similar to this one, only very slightly divergent. It is reasonable to suppose that such a world produced the Erikson Drive at the same time as we did. Or you did . . .

" Here's the rub. The parallel worlds are parallel—which means that they can never meet. But extend those parallel lines to Infinity, or even only out as far as the Centaurian System, and there's a certain . . . fuzziness ? Or diffusion ? Or whatever. Look at it this way ; we went out on one set of tracks, came back on another . . ."

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The bartender tilted the bottle to refill both Mercer's glass and his own. He said cheerfully, " Well, it's not too bad. If you'd really got off the tracks, if you'd returned to the world where Hitler won his war, for example, you *would* have found a difference !"

" I found a difference when I got back," said Mercer flatly. " I found the difference between having a wife and a home, and I loved both, and having neither. Goodnight."

He left his drink almost untasted, walked a little unsteadily out of the bar.

He almost collided with her on the sidewalk outside the place. He recognised her (although she did not, could not recognise him) with a surge of emotion that left him weak and dizzy. She was older, of course (*she* had not undergone stasis) but the lines of experience had added to rather than detracted from the austere beauty of her features.

" Lynn !" he cried.

She stopped, stared at him curiously, said, " I'm afraid that I don't . . ."

" It doesn't matter," he told her, " not any more. Lynn, I've come home."

George Whitley

Important Notice To British Readers

Some confusion has arisen in the British distributive trade regarding science fiction magazines published in this country and inadvertently we are suffering through no fault of our own. Some readers have written in to say that they are unable to obtain the three Nova magazines at their local bookstalls as they are no longer being distributed through wholesale channels. Please note :

No changes in distribution have been made by ourselves. This error is due to the distributors of the American magazines *Galaxy* and *If* ceasing to supply the wholesale trade. Please notify your retailer of this fact if necessary.

The title of this magazine is not being changed. Many readers seem to be under the impression that we have announced an impending change of title. This is not so. There is a title change in force for the American magazine *Astounding Science Fiction* which is changing to *Analog Science Fact Fiction.*

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Justin's "colour sense," which warns him of approaching danger, is to play a large part in his struggle to become an Aristo ; but in a world of special talents even this may not be sufficient.

THE FATAL FIRE

by KENNETH BULMER

Part Two of Three Parts

foreword

As a result of the 20th Century's technological growth and the industrialization of major cities, the late 21st Century sees mankind divided into three groups—the Aristos, the ruling class, capable of performing many duties simultaneously and comprising the money barons, corporations, and manipulators of the Galaxy's finances ; the Construction Crews, comprising the better educated and capable of skilled work ; and the inhabitants of the Pools attached to each great city—a shiftless, workless, group of virtual serfs, short-lived and bred solely for their usefulness to the Aristos. There were, however, always opportunities for a smart Pool youngster to graduate to a Company man and even to the fringes of the Aristo class, possibly as an Assassin or a Shield Bearer.

JULIAN JUSTIN is one such Pool arab, due to be apprenticed to Honest John Flayer, a merchant who collects human hides from the Pool for binding the books of the city's library. Justin, accompanied by his close friend RAPHE BARTRAM, is sent with the skin of his half-sister Bella Rose to Gorgon Industries.

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En route they discuss their plans for the future—Raphe wants to become an Assassin, Julian hopes to use a peculiar talent he has (a mental colour sense which warns of danger) to improve his position.

At Gorgon Industries Raphe's swagger gets them into trouble and Julian is hypnotised before his colour sense can give him warning. He comes out of the trance to find that he has been conscripted into the Construction Crews and is en route to Erinore, a newly discovered planet due for colonisation. The CC men are due to build a spaceport as well as living accommodation for the settlers. As the months go by and the work progresses he becomes friendly with a gambler named ED RAYBURN who puts Julian's talent to work for them in amassing a tidy fortune. They desert the CC, steal a flyer and make for the city's spaceport where they plan to take over a small spaceship and make for Earth with sufficient money to set themselves up in business.

The most powerful financial group in the Empire is that of the SKARDON family; old Eli, his two sons Harold and Louis, Harold's daughter Estelle and Louis' son young Eli. Their Combine virtually rules the wealth of the expanding Earth economy and they are constantly open to physical as well as financial attacks by rival corporations. Harold is attacked by an Assassin while flying over the Indian Ocean and eventually has to call up his Shield Bearer service to ward off the danger. He arrives at a family conference to learn that their financial holdings are being attacked by an unknown group and that young Eli is advocating old Eli to retire and let the younger members adopt new measures to offset the assault. Old Eli refuses and the family begin plotting their own devious methods for obtaining power.

seven

The space field lay flat and featureless like an eternally frozen sea of concrete over which the mournful blasts of electronic and magnetic guidance systems wailed like the bleak and icy winds forever howling above an arctic barrenness. A few scattered lights, from control tower and the fins of the few spaceships berthed around the perimeter, merely emphasized the eerie waste of loneliness.

From a small private space yacht a dark figure dropped down the antigrav landing chute. As his booted feet struck the concrete and he turned at once into the shadows under the

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hull, his cloak swirled away from his body. No badge glittered on that cloak. It was anonymously grey. But it was no more anonymous than its wearer, whose face was completely hidden behind a plastic mask that served, as well as disguise, as very effective facial armour.

One second the man was there. The next, he had gone.

His handiwork ticked silently to itself, bedded down in the space yacht's cybernetic nerve centre controlling the entire functioning of the ship. It ticked gleefully, maliciously, expectantly.

Like the man who had planted it there, it was expendable.

The space field lay flat and featureless like the vast marble entrance platform to Heaven. The sun shone obliquely in the early morning, throwing sharp shadows and glinting highlights from the ships berthed around the perimeter. Nothing stirred as yet ; the earliest scheduled departure was the ten o'clock mail rocket to Ruyer's planet.

" My old grannie always said," Ed pronounced oracularly, shifting his lean body more comfortably in the grass, " that when you're on to a good thing, milk it for all you're worth."

Julian Justin did not reply. He was carefully watching the spacefield from their vantage point in the ditch bisecting a little hill rising from the western edge. He still didn't believe they'd really broken out of the CC compound and taken the little flier and brought her here. She lay now snuggled down at the rear of the little hill. The next objective lay before them.

They'd argued some more about the ebullient Ed's plan to walk in quite openly, flash their new-found wealth around and simply book passage on the next ship to Earth. There were problems. One of those problems was their total lack of a Company badge. Neither of them had in their lives before ever longed for a shackling emblem ; now they desperately wanted two company badges—and the clothes that went with them.

" An ōld friend of mine," Justin said slowly, following through Ed's remark, " would say in these circumstances that unless we do something and do something damn quick, we won't be on to a good thing any more."

" My old grannie—"

" Raphe Bartram would say," interrupted Justin firmly, " that we should just stand up and stroll straight down there and find ourselves a nice little spaceship."

" If you think I can handle a spaceship—"

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"You handled that flier as though you were an Aristo rolling home from a drunken orgy. No, Ed. I don't expect you to fly the ship. We have to find a pilot and then—persuade him, shall we say?—to fly her for us."

"In these brown uniforms?"

When Ed Rayburn was cutting, he was brief.

Justin stood up. "Come on. We can talk all day and dream up brilliant idea after idea. But that won't get us a ship."

Ed rose, his lanky form seeming to jacknife at every effort. He slouched down after Justin, who, despite the quivering anxiety in him, was seeing his colours quite clearly and could only hope that those colours wouldn't change drastically before they reached the first available spaceship. Little puffs of dust rose under their feet. The sun, still early and slanting, was growing perceptibly warmer and yet, despite the peacefulness of the scene any Earthman, in one glance, could have told that this was not Earth. Feeling very exposed and very alone—in which he did an injustice to Ed—Justin walked resolutely down to the spaceport.

Most of the ships were berthed around the perimeter. One or two, including in that number the ten o'clock mail rocket, stood in their launching cradles, the sun striking vagrant gleams from cunning curves in their hulls.

Justin selected the nearest small ship. She lay at an angle of forty-five degrees, polished, sleek, betraying in every line and venturi her power, speed—and wealth.

"Hurry it up, Julian!" Ed protested, treading on Justin's heels.

"Take it easy," Justin said back, without turning his head. "The alarm is sure to have been broadcast by now. If we go running down there we'll advertise that we're the two escaped CC men. Act your age."

"Well—" grumbled Ed. He wasn't enjoying this one little bit.

"And we have to make sure there is a pilot aboard. The place looks like a graveyard right now."

"Cheer us up, pal," Ed said. Then he caught Justin's arm. "There's a guy over there now—look, just walking out of that office block. Mechanic, by the look of him."

"Ignore him. Walk as though you had business here. He's some way off yet."

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" And getting nearer every minute."

The two men walked on steadily. It appeared to Justin's heightened imagination that the time dragged so that an eternity separated them from the perimeter and the ship lying so temptingly beyond. Their boots crunched dirt, then gravel and then—blessedly, concrete. Still they strode on undeviatingly. The mechanic looked across at the sound of their boots, a casual, early morning interest apparent in his movements.

Then Ed gasped. Justin waved. He waved in a friendly, off-Earth way, and—the mechanic waved back.

" God bless whatever Pool he came out of," Ed said. " If he ever came from that far down."

By this time it was evident that the mechanic was making for the same space yacht as that the two escapees were approaching. Justin swallowed. He did not change direction by a single millimetre.

The three men met under one wide arching fin.

Before the mechanic had time to frame any sort of question, Justin said : " Excuse me, friend. We're looking for the Field Superintendent." He smiled easily, moving slightly sideways so that the downward sweeping fin obtruded its shining polish between the three men and the office and tower block. " Can you tell me where I can find him ?"

He had no further need of talk. Ed's arms were around the mechanic who had been taken completely by surprise and were gradually tightening.

" Leave him enough breath to breathe, Ed, and not enough to shout." Justin spoke incisively. " Can you fly a spaceship, bub ?"

The mechanic was badly frightened. His pimply face above the off-white overalls had no power, in this moment of desperate urgency, to move Justin to feelings of pity.

" Well ? Come on man, speak up."

" Flying a spaceship's easy." The man swallowed against Ed's restraining arm. " All automatic. Nothing to it."

" Can you ?"

The man shook his head sullenly.

Ed began to swear in a fluent monotone. Justin said ; " When is this ship due to takeoff next ?"

" Hour's time ; I'm giving her a last minute check."

" So that means an hour we have to wait."

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" Wait ! Let's move to the next ship—" Ed began, his thin face and hands alike twitching in the intensity of his anxiety to be away. Justin shook his head.

" We're cooped up in this ship now, Ed, whether we like it or not. There are plenty of people moving about there now." He pointed.

The mechanic, despite Ed's choking grip, managed to bring forth a sound that might have been a laugh. "They're readying the mail rocket. You two haven't a hope in hades . . ."

The word was new to Justin. " Come on," he said firmly. " Let's climb aboard." When they had negotiated the antigrav chute and were standing in the small control room filled with the metal glitter of bank after bank of automatic instruments, Justin said : " What's hades ?"

" Literary word for hell," Ed said casually. " Of course, you haven't progressed that far in reading lessons yet."

They were standing in the control room of a spaceship they were about to steal—when the pilot conveniently put in an appearance ; they were hunted men, with death as their punishment—and they began an impassioned argument about a tiny stone town on the edge of a forgotten sea that was fought over and finally destroyed by men using crude hand weapons and who called for help from gods as barbarian as themselves.

" You'll be reading all about it, as soon as you can scan a page a little more rapidly than you do now," Ed said. "Anyhow it's over-rated. The men and women were nothing short of childish ; and their actions were so violent and un-self-controlled that it's no wonder most landed up in a psychopathic ward."

Ed began to explain to Justin the numerous words in common usage stemming from those old sources—and only the mechanic's frightened eyes followed the sweep of the hands of the clock. Outside on the spacefield on this planet so very far away from those old plains of Troy the daily business routine of the men of Earth was beginning. The mail rocket drew all attention. No one had bothered to enquire why a mechanic was so long checking over a little space yacht.

Presently a small ground car pulled away from the shadows of the central block and scudded in a thin plume of dust across the concrete, swirled in a half-turn under the space yacht. Doors slammed. A man's deep voice shouted some jocular remark. The car drove away.

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" This, my friend, is it," Ed said, softly.

The mechanic had been tied and gagged neatly and only his wise staring eyes contained movement. Ed pushed him out of sight of anyone entering the control room and went to stand with Justin in the shadows of the entrance-door wall. They waited.

Brisk footsteps approached, the firm footfalls of an arrogant Aristo. The man entered the control room and strode at once to the pilot's chair. Tantalisingly, Justin waited. He could not be sure that there was only this one man ; perhaps his friends were even now ascending the antigrav chute ?

Impulsive as usual, Ed settled the question. He hefted the wrecking-bar taken from its bracket by the airlock valves and positioned himself in one fluid motion at the back of the Aristo in the pilot's chair. Some obscure relation in what they had been discussing must have motivated Ed's next words.

" Just take it easy, bub, and you won't get hurt. This bar may not possess the well-made beauty of the old Trojan weapons ; but it can put a ferocious dent in your skull."

The man turned his head, quite slowly, quite composedly. His long tapering fingers rested lightly on the switchboard. He did not make any attempt to reach for a switch or lever. His body was very relaxed—but very still.

" I'd heard that you two had escaped from the CC ; but I cannot say that I'd expected the pleasure of your company." He spoke in a pleasant light tenor voice. His face had the hallmarks of classical Aristo handsomeness. " I'd recommend that you untied Arthur fairly soon ; those cords tend to restrict the blood circulation—"

" All right, bub !" Ed, with his wrecking bar still poised above the head of this self-possessed, smooth Aristo, looked, even to Justin, somehow unnecessary, somehow ridiculous.

Ed brought the bar down in a blur of speed. It rang like a gong from the arm of the co-pilot's chair. The arm ripped away in a welter of foam upholstery and dented metal.

" We're getting off this planet, bub," Ed said, making each word a harsh missile to penetrate this Aristo's armour of civilised indifference. "And you're flying us. Understand ?"

" I understand your desires, fellow. As to my co-operation, that, as you must realise, is another matter." The familiar ring of authority bit into his next words. " And you haven't untied Arthur. Do it right away !"

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" Why you—" Ed growled.

" He's right." Justin moved to the unfortunate mechanic and began to untie his arms and legs. He left the gag in. "Just keep quiet, Arthur," he said kindly. " And you won't have your skull stoved in."

" Smashing up the furniture is also quite unnecessary," the Aristo went on with that infuriating voice in which a mocking laugh bubbled in each syllable. " It doesn't impress me."

" This bar will impress your skull—" Ed began belligerently.

" Save it." The Aristo moved, gesturing towards the control boards. " If this crate is to lift jets I'd suggest you let me proceed to it. I don't have a lot of time to spare."

" You don't seem to appreciate your position," Justin said quietly. He had been checking his colours and they seemed to be all right. " You are in our power—"

" Where do you want to go ? Earth ?"

" Yes."

" Right, then. Let's cut the dramatics, shall we, and start?"

The cool audacity of the man was new and intriguing to Justin. Most men he knew, faced with the situation, would have shown unmistakeable symptoms of fear. Not so this indifferent Aristo. His whole attitude was one of impatience to rid himself of his two unwelcome guests, and that attitude was not motivated by fear ; he just considered, Justin sensed dimly, that he was begriming himself by the contact.

The thought made Justin furiously angry—and ashamed.

" What about Arthur ?"

" He'll have to come with us. We can't have him giving the alarm."

" Very well. I'm calling the tower now. Please—"

" You'll just say the routine checks," Ed butted in, moving the bar. " And nothing else, understand, or—"

" Or you'll use that ill-made weapon," the Aristo said in a bored voice. " Now shut up and let me lift jets."

Arthur, during this, was trying to indicate very plainly that he had no wish or desire to become spaceborne ; everyone ignored him. The Aristo began speaking into one radio mike.

" Flight Two calling Tower. Have I permission to clear ?"

" Tower calling Flight Two. Go ahead, Mister Hurwitz. And a pleasant journey."

The Aristo chuckled. " Thank you for your kind thought. The journey promises to be—interesting—to say the least."

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Ed relaxed, the raised bar drooping. He breathed out heavily between his teeth. He had the sense not to say anything whilst the radio was open.

Arthur gobbled and choked on his gag and Justin kicked him. Arthur fell silent.

The ship lifted.

And at once, bursting in like a supernova, colours flamed into pulsating life in Justin's brain.

Everything about the colours smelled wrong.

Abruptly sweating, Justin said thickly : " Colours ! Ed, the colours smell wrong—we've got to land at once. There is something wrong with the ship !"

The Aristo looked up with a penetrative glance that drew his face into a shrewd calculating gargoyle.

Ed said, roughly, holding the wrecking bar : " We go on, Julian. We must go on ! We cannot go back !"

" But the ship—I tell you—the ship is going to crash !"

" That's too bad ! We can't go back, you know that ! We've got to chance it, Julian."

" Yes." The words were dragged from Justin, scorching his mind where his colours told him that pressing danger threatened him. " We must chance it. We must go on !"

eight

" What is all this talk of colours ?" demanded the Aristo.

Responding to the voice of habitual authority, Justin tried to put into words what he was experiencing at that moment. He was shaking now, and his face was grey and drawn with pressures that boiled in his head.

" They're not really colours. But whatever they are, smell, taste, feeling, I've never been wrong—have I ever been wrong, Ed ?"

"No," Ed said shortly, aghast at what he had done.

" There is something wrong, somewhere about, something that will put me in danger. What it is, I do not know. But this is a spaceship — and spaceships can crash, blow up, be destroyed in any number of mysterious ways—"

The Aristo gestured towards the radio sets. " I'm shutting these right off. We cannot talk to anyone on planet. Now, untie Arthur at once, and give him what information you can. You—" he pointed at Justin. " You "—he pointed at Ed—

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" put that damn great silly bar down and do what Arthur tells you. I assume neither of you can read ; but you must have some idea of machinery from working in the CC. And hurry ! If this—thing—whatever it is, is not discovered very quickly I shall have no alternative but to land again."

Arthur was freed and, rubbing stiff limbs, was hustled by the Aristo into checking the ship. Ed and Justin stood uneasily by, aware that this situation had slid now altogether into the capable hands of the Aristo—his name was Hurwitz, Justin recalled from the Tower man's good wishes.

The mood that had possessed Justin when he had gone striding down onto the spacefield had all evaporated. Then he had been buoyed by the heady knowledge that, for the first time in his life, he was performing actions on his own volition, was taking the decisions himself. Now he was back in the typical Pool apathy ; the typical CC man's meek submission to authority. Nothing mattered at the moment, though, but the rapid discovery of whatever it was that was sending these threatening colours shooting through his brain.

" I suppose," Hurwitz said, " that Arthur didn't check the ship this morning ? I suppose you two grabbed him as soon as he arrived ? Oh, well, what more can you expect—?"

For all the fear in Arthur and the throat-constricting tension that unnerved Justin and Ed, Hurwitz remained as cool as a deep-freeze. He sat calmly watching the mechanic at work. Arthur went at the control panels, ripping them out and tracing through circuits, checking with the manuals, giving curt orders to the two CC men to hold this and to pull that and, with the familiar work under his fingers, he lost a deal of his fear and his movements became more sure and more deliberate.

Justin said : " The colours are still hideously strong. I don't know what the danger is ; but it is getting nearer."

Arthur began checking off facilities. " Air okay. Tubes okay. Art-grav okay. Thermocouples okay. Negfield drive okay. Radar okay. Subetheric radio okay." He glanced across at Hurwitz. " Planetary radio okay, I assume ?"

" I've been using it. It might be. Leave it until you have checked everything else. What is left ?"

Arthur rattled off various other facilities and went at them hard. Nothing showed up. The tension, which had relaxed with the action of doing something, began to screw down again.

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Justin licked his lips. He felt awful. Something terrible was about to occur—and he was completely helpless to prevent it.

" I've carried out a full-scale pre-flight check, Mister Hurwitz. Nothing else left except—"

" There must be something !" Justin said despairingly. " There must be."

Hurwitz said mildly : " What about the cybernetic over-all control, Arthur ?"

" You can't check that, Mister Hurwitz," Arthur protested. " That's sealed. Only the spaceship yards are equipped even to go near it."

Ed said : " There might be a time bomb planted anywhere, in the toilet—"

Hurwitz smiled. " I had thought of that, too. I am convinced that an assassin has tinkered with this ship. It seems to me that whatever he did must be something that would not be inspected by Arthur on his routine pre-flight check." The pleasant voice hardened. " Arthur—rip open the cyb control ! Have a look inside."

" But, Mister Hurwitz . . ."

" Do as the man says, bub," Ed said harshly, moving the wrecking bar threateningly. " He knows what he's talking about."

" Thank you," Hurwitz said, smiling bleakly.

Arthur opened the cyb control. The panels moved out easily and two red lights immediately began burning on the warning board.

" That's funny," Arthur said ; " Usually those panels take a bit of moving—and there is no warning hooter."

" Hurry, Arthur," Hurwitz urged him. " You're on to it !"

The mechanic removed the panels and revealed so complex a mass of wiring, valving, computer engineering that Justin, for one, was hopelessly at sea. No wonder it took a Company engineer ten years apprenticeship just to get to know the overall principles of the cyb control. Arthur, who had been a dirty grey colour more or less from the time Ed had put his neck-crushing lock on him, now turned a shade of green. He was as badly frightened a man as Justin has ever seen.

" There, Mister Hurwitz—that flat black package, wired in to the circuits—you see ?"

" I see." The Aristo was peering in, they were all clustered in the cabin of the spaceship, peering in at their deaths. The air was suddenly icy cold.

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" I've never seen one before," Arthur said, his voice shaking so that he covered octaves. " But I've heard of 'em. They call them fiddler mechs. They can subtly twist the cyb control's instructions, so that the pilot steers blindly to destruction—"

" Let's have less talk and more action," Hurwitz said, still in that mild voice that was like oiled velvet sliding over steel. " Rip it out."

" I can't ! I can't !" Arthur shrank away. " There's probably a booby trap on it. If that doesn't take off my hand and arm, then the whole thing will be geared to go off as soon as it's moved—I know. I know !"

By some sleight of hand that Justin could not follow, Hurwitz had produced a gun. He held it quite negligently. It pointed at Arthur.

" Arthur," the Aristo said. " Arthur. Either you take that fiddler thing out, now, or I shoot you in the stomach. Whatever happens, you lose."

The sheer depths of cruelty in the voice and words gave Justin a queasy feeling that these Aristos weren't fully human. Arthur was sucking in air in great sobbing breaths. He tried to speak, and failed. His eyes were enormous.

" Go on, Arthur. Do the job for which you are paid."

" Give the guy a drink," Justin said, surprising himself.

" There can't be much time," Ed said. No one seemed to remark on the singular rapidity with which the gun had sprung into Hurwitz's hand. The Aristo smiled, pulled out a flask and tossed it to Arthur. The mechanic took a long swig ; whisky dribbled down his chin.

The gun jerked authoritatively. " Now do your job !"

Arthur took visible grip on his courage. He used a long plastic insulated pair of tongs from his tool kit and began snipping connections. Sweat ran down his face to mingle with the whisky. The silence was intense. There was only Arthur's hoarse ragged breathing, the click of his instruments in all the galaxy—the ordinary ship-board sounds had long since faded into a background noise-level.

Each time he cut a connection free Arthur grunted. The sound grated on Justin's nerves. His colours still flamed in his mind, screaming a warning. He gripped his hands together, and waited.

How far out the spaceyacht was he did not know. A number of irreconcilables was worrying him, nagging away

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below the immediate and horrific problem of this fiddler mechanism which Arthur was with such fear removing from the controlling brain of the spaceship. He pushed worries away and tried to control his own insane desire to run shrieking from the control room.

"It's—coming . . ." Arthur said. He sounded as though he was in extreme pain. The others scarcely dared to breathe.

But there was a booby trap. A very cunning booby trap.

Arthur straightened suddenly. In his hands he held a part of the flat box—and then that box, those hands, melted and flowed and dripped to the deck.

And the ship went mad.

The ship's single controlling impulse that, under the human guidance of the pilot, was responsible for every individual function of the ship, had been cruelly crippled. Like a great blue whale of the antarctic seas when the killer whales shear off gruesome portions of its anatomy, the ship had been tortured beyond endurance. The puny humans within that agonised frame of metal and plastic were flung in haphazard clumps from wall to wall and from deck to overhead. Lights blazed up, and died. Fumes stank in the air. The artificial gravity surged in uncontrollable pulses that flung the humans like ninepins, plastering them against sharp metal slats with a force of ten gravities and then contemptuously hurling them away under conditions of free fall. Blood, vomit, fumes, smoke and a welter of objects torn free from their brackets pirouetted in the control room.

In the mad melee Justin found himself lying across the chart table with Hurwitz.

"We have to get out of this !" The Aristo's face was cut and his smart clothes were slashed in many places. "I put the ship into a stable low-level orbit as soon as you reported—" They were ruthlessly hurled against the far wall. Justin managed to fend himself off and caught Hurwitz as the Aristo tumbled helplessly past.

"How—do we get out ?" he managed to gasp out.

"Make for the escape airlock. There is a small manual flier there. Our only chance !"

Ed was mixed up in a flailing mess of wiring ripped from smashed wall panelling. Blood glittered in spinning drops. Justin grabbed a leg and hauled, pulling Ed along after Hurwitz. Arthur had already gone, shrieking, completely useless without hands.

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When they reached, after being bruised and bumped and shaken, the airlock, they found Arthur jammed up in a corner. His head had been caved in against the metal hinges. Evidently, unable to fend himself off, he had at last been thrust too hard to save himself ; and now was dead.

Justin had no time to feel sorry for the unfortunate man.

If they were to save their own skins, they had to get out of this crazy ship at once. At any minute, Hurwitz told them, the ship could blow up, open to space, crack—do any of a hundred unpleasant things that would finish them permanently.

They followed the Aristo's directions implicitly, happy to have a guiding authority, so long had they been accustomed to having every detail of their lives planned and ordained for them by others. The airlock valve was opened. They scrambled through, into the little flier lying within in her padded cocoon, and, moving with frantic haste, they spun the wheels to close the manually-operated inner valves and dogged the flier's doors close shut. Hurwitz went at once to the control chair. Justin and Ed threw themselves down onto upholstered couches and strapped in.

A red warning light went on.

"Let us hope that the ship will release the flier . . ." Hurwitz said. His voice was as grim as Justin had ever heard it during the whole of the emergency.

Justin was caught completely unawares by the pummeling surge of acceleration that flung the little flier away from the doomed spaceship and pressed him ruthlessly back into the couch. Manually controlled by Hurwitz, controlled in spasms of lucidity between phases shot through with the lurid glow of pain-wracked madness, the flier's descent to the ground was a wild gyrating series of lurches and plunges. Each spasmodic lunge flung the occupants deeply into their cushioned supports and wrenched Hurwitz's hands from the controls. Only by using every ounce of strength in him was the Aristo able to retain a semblance of control.

The flier swooped down.

There was, for Justin, a chaotic impression of brightness and flame, of noise and bruising concussion, and then, finally and mercifully, of darkness and quietness and peace.

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nine

The outworld planet of Erinore had been settled by Earthmen for only a handful of years and the town centres constructed by the Construction Crews working for the Government of the Solar Technocratic Empire were filling slowly with immigrants, leaving the rest of the planet as empty of intelligent life as it had been from the moment of its birth. Widespread areas of the surface consisted of jungles like those of the Amazonian bush of Earth, others of vast rolling prairies and steppes, and yet others of harsh and hostile deserts like the Sahara and the Gobi and the American South West.

Of all the places on Erinore that the falling flier chose to crash upon, no one appeared on balance to offer greater advantages than another. Certainly, humans might not die of thirst in the jungle or prairie areas as they would in the deserts ; but without proper food or equipment, any waste of tenantless land offered little hope of life. Slim though the chance of survival might appear to the normal human being stripped of his mechanical servants and aids, the three men who had fallen in the flier, each in his own way was not normally human.

The most obvious departure from the norm was Paul Hurwitz, the Aristo. Julian Justin, with his colour sense of impending danger, was also un-normal. As for Ed, his peculiar talents of wild fancy-free imaginative flights and quick money-talk lifted him, too, from the usual ruck of humanity. These three men landed on the surface, their flier hopelessly wrecked, and, when they had recovered consciousness and doctored one anothers' wounds, took stock of their situation.

What followed, however much it might be diluted by modern thinking, was an epic.

They had come down in wide flat bush country, with the lonely twisted trees scattered at intervals across the plain showing where water might be found, if the seeker knew how to look. Chest high grasses flourished. Bird life was shrill and busy all about them ; yet the birds built their nests only in trees and bushes that clumped together on the occasional swellings in the ground which broke the horizon line like miniature archipelagoes.

The days were long and warm and dry, with greenly glowing twilights that stretched mysterious bands of fire around the western horizon. It was a big country. As they patched

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together what tools they could from the wreck, made themselves rucsacs and carrying-cradles, water bottles and dural thumbsticks against the journey, the common labour drew them together so that, in the stillness of the day, they had no need of twittering speech. They were content to work and plan, and to leave the noisemaking to the birds that sang eternally above them.

Nights were cold. Fabrics and cloaks were shared equally between them so that one should lie awake at night with cold nipping at toe or ear. When they began their trek they looked quite naturally to Hurwitz to lead them out of the wilderness and back to the hearths of men. He knew in which direction the nearest town lay only through his superficial knowledge of Erinore ; the ship in her last agonies might have carried them anywhere.

" If we walk eastwards," Hurwitz said in the morning, pointing under the rising sun, " we shall, one day, strike a city."

" How long ?" Ed asked, lifting his bundle.

" Does it matter ?" Justin clapped his friend on the back. He felt free, uplifted, sloughed of all doubts and fears. What lay before them was a segment out of his life, a section cut from time, not to be touched by anything else he might have done and might do. " Does it matter ?"

" No," Ed replied, smiling and catching his friends spirit. " This is something between us and the gods."

Hurwitz joined in, here, commenting on Ed's continual odd references to the Trojan tales and the Homeric legends. " That," he told them gravely, " was the main reason I listened to you at all. You didn't seem the usual curs running from the CC."

" And what about Julian's colours ?" Ed protested.

Hurwitz laughed. " I have plans for them. But don't think they are unique. Far from it—at least," here he frowned and traced lines in the dust with his stick, " at least, colours is wrong and, also, self-preservation is rather unusual—and most convenient."

" What do your colours say about this trip ?" asked Ed.

" They tell me nothing." Justin looked under the early sun at the far off horizon, ochre against the deep blue, and the unending sea of rippling grass and the lonely outposts of stunted trees and straggly bushes. He grasped his stick. "But

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I like the smell of the land. It is clean. It has none of the soot of the Pool, none of the machine-oil of the barracks."

"This is not a good land," Hurwitz said, surprising them. "It is cruel. Nothing lives here but by struggle and killing; death is the only law."

"You can say that about the Pool, too."

"I know. And about the big business world in which I live with its assassins and never-ending struggles for power and position—but," here Hurwitz fingered the stubbly beginnings of his beard, "but here, in this wilderness, the struggle is insensate. It is mindless. When I make a raid on another company, rip out their assets, sell them all down the line, they know I am a thinking man, and I know they are men who are planning to come back into the battle. It is then I watch my back. But here—"

"Yes," Justin said. "It's the same in the Pool. The life there is sprawling, riotous, hectic. We steal and cheat and fiddle to earn enough to eat, and we know that the people we are doing down will be doing us down tomorrow."

"Here," Hurwitz said softly, "is a mindless death."

Ed shivered. "Hell! The place don't look so bad to me. Just a long hike. And my feet are killing me before we start."

The tension of the brooding land was broken. The three men took their bundles and their sticks and the knives they had sharpened from strips of metal torn from the flier. Where a man's brain was pitted against naked nature—even on an alien planet—then once that brain had planned tools for the hands to fashion and use, nature stood very little chance.

The days passed. They walked. The food from the lockers of the flier was rapidly exhausted and they steered their course from tree-clump to tree-clump, at each one taking enough birds to make meals until they reached the next. Before that, as was expected with the heat laying over them an electric blanket of stultifying breathlessness, the water in the bottles was spent.

Hurwitz had taken his position as leader automatically as an Aristo. But the others would have followed him no matter who he was; they saw all too clearly that he had knowledge of this place that meant life—knowledge, he told them casually, he had picked up from an information-tape run through just before his trip on business here. Now when they approached one of the bush-crowned islands he went quickly from shrub to shrub, peering at the leaves. He pointed.

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Ed lifted his curved piece of sharpened metal and, using it like a machete, hacked down the small bush. When Hurwitz slashed a cross-cut on one hard stem, the others exclaimed in surprise at the hollow interior and the pulpy mass from which a milky and sharp-tasting liquid exuded.

" This is one bush to watch," Hurwitz told them. " There are others. Here, in this land, it is life."

Marching across the barren face of the land they worked as a team. The Aristo took his turn in cooking and camp chores. They became fused into one brain and one personality. A quarrel, besides being a piece of monumental idiocy and suicidal folly, would, in their close-knit sense of dedication and determination to outface the perils of their situation, have appeared to them to be obscene. There was no conscious fostering of this spirit of comradeliness, no fulsome speeches, no over-eagerness to help. They just did what had to be done and in the way of things with intelligent men those things were mutually beneficial. And around them the cast plain stretched, mysterious, clothed it seemed forever in its cloak of waving brasses, stippled with its islands of trees and birds.

It never rained.

Justin's colours warned them more than once of approaching dangers and they obeyed without question. Soon they followed the dictates of the colour-sense without a second question even when nothing of danger was subsequently seen. Justin's presentiment of peril was just one more weapon in their combined armoury against the hostile alienness about them.

Lying wrapped in their scraps of cloth at night under the stars—under the alien star patterns—they talked long and involved talks ; discussions that ranged from Homer's Troy to the starship designs that were planned to carry migrants clear across the galaxy. To Justin these conversations were revelations of worlds and ideas of which he had had no inkling; he soaked up knowledge like a sponge ; once new concepts had broken down his Pool-bred ignorance, he went hog-wild on culture. From the Aristo, who shared their common feeling of one-ness, he grasped at ways of thinking and attitudes to life that previously would have sloughed off him completely non-understood. The ideas of ' work ' and ' non-employed ' gradually came to have different meanings from those he had accepted all his life.

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For the first time since he had thought seriously—very probably he was the first for hundreds of years, Hurwitz pointed out sombrely—he, as an inhabitant of the Pool, could sit quietly and thoughtfully and discuss with an Aristo without rancour the ills of modern society and their origins. Certainly, science had brought untold wealth within the grasp of men. That wealth had to be paid for not only in mechanical and technical terms, but in social customs and disordered lives. Where before a cobbler had sat at his last, patiently labouring all day over the production of a pair of shoes, and then those shoes could be turned out by mass production at a tenth of the cost and manpower, readjustment had been difficult and painful. But readjustment had taken place. Capitalism and Labour had struggled one with the other and had found a modus vivendi. Then science had moved forward to automation and the shoes could be manufactured from the rolls of plastic leather to the display cabinet with the pressure of only a single button to represent labour. Technicians and their magic machinery also began not to be used to the full.

The idea of capitalist society in maintaining a pool of unemployed on which to draw as necessary had been revived and then rendered obsolescent. The unions with their closed shop principles had added their own excluders. Automation began to ensure that a fluctuating labour demand no longer applied ; work could be planned ahead and the labour force known down to the last tea girl.

Once society had decided on that, those in the pool of unemployed would remain that way, outsiders. When work was plentiful they had been used ; in time of slump they had been callously ignored with a dole and a religious text. Now that they were no longer needed as a labour force, then it was a short step as a matter of practicable economics that a Pool should become a viable concept.

Unemployed in the great industrial areas of the world, they had retreated within their festering Pools, growing in on themselves, setting up primitive cultures within the wider terrestrial culture. The process had been gradual, almost unnoticed except by the economic planners and those in the Pools who relied more and more on themselves for livelihood and less and less upon the world outside.

Even when space was being opened up the cost of transportation in the beginning had necessitated the use only of

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technicians and scientists of high calibre ; there was little room for a man whose skill with a shovel was his only work asset. The Construction Crews with their automatically operated robot teams were a half-way stage ; no intelligent man wished to spend his life terraforming planets under higher supervision, with robots for light conversation.

Management, technology and labour had contrived another modus vivendi within the Companies. The discarded surplus labour force, unwanted, disregarded, embarrassing, went on surviving within the Pools.

With that acceptance, Justin could follow through the logic of the subsequent developments.

Ed showed up in a strange light in these nightly discussions on the trail. After a hard day of slogging forward through the grasses with nerves relaxed yet ready to tense to an immediate thrill of danger if one of the poisonous or small carnivorous animals should cross their path, he would ramble on about his ' plans ' and his schemes of making money and his talk would be interspersed with references to the gods and the heroes so that even Justin was forced to laugh. To him, insensibly but strongly, came the conviction that Paul Hurwitz was fashioning their friendship to a certain end. What that design might be, Justin did not know ; but in their new-found comradeship he had no doubts but that it was for their own good. Where one profited here, in this stark and hostile land, they all benefited.

As the days went by the islands where water and food and fuel were to be found grew more scattered, more distant, and, dismayingly, smaller in size. They waded through the seas of grass, breasting down the crackling stems, and it was with a very real and painful sense of relief that they located the next island and pressed forward to it. More and more they felt that they were Earthmen in an alien land.

As Hurwitz told them, standing and mopping his brow one blazing noon day : " This land does not want us. If we are to live here as men we will have to bring our bulldozers and our concrete and our massess of scientists and technicians. This land tears down the weak."

" Well," Ed said, pausing beside Hurwitz. " It hasn't torn us down yet." He took a short, sparing drink from his water bottle. " And I've plans for life. I have to get back to Earth. We all do. We all have things to do, so many things."

" More things than perhaps you realise, Ed," said Hurwitz.

Justin looked at him, and then walked on without speaking.

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That day his colours flamed again. He stood still with the others watching anxiously under the high alien sky. Slowly he turned, his heels digging into the crumbling earth and dust beneath the tall grass. As he faced through the compass points and still his colours flamed before his inner eye the pressing feeling of panic lay more heavily upon him. With each small turn, each compass degree gone, less chance remained to them of finding a way through.

Ed and Hurwitz stood, graven, waiting.

Justin found, at last, a spot on the horizon to which, if he walked forward, his colours would not warn him against the direction, would not shrill at him to turn about.

He said, numbly : " This is the only clear way."

He was facing directly back the way they had come.

In the grass, wavering but keeping a line, he could see the darker sides of the stalks where their passage had brushed them aside. That shadowed trail was the only rational creation in view. It was the only thing in all that landscape that had been made by man.

A narrow wavering track in an ocean of grass—a small, fragile, easily destroyed creation for the best a man could do.

" No way forward . . ." said Ed.

" No islands left . . ." said Hurwitz.

The disaster had crept up on them stealthily. They had not been expecting it. Everything had been going so well.

And now—to go forward was courting death.

" The colour smell is dubious," Justin said at last, trying to put heart into his words. " A general danger warning. Not sharp or positive. We could go on—"

" We must." Ed's voice was high, shrill with the clogging dryness that infected all their throats.

Hurwitz paused. The others watched him. At last, deliberately, he said : " Yes, we must go forward. In this direction lies the nearest city. And soon the monsoon season will be upon us, when this whole plain turns into an ocean and only the islands are left above the flood."

" We'd be trapped then," said Ed. " We couldn't last out the rains on just one island."

" Come on then." Justin began to move on, extending that darkened track among the grasses. " Let's get on with it and save our energies for walking, not talking."

The others followed him and, in all conscience, it was easier for them. They did not have to force a way bodily ahead

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against the thrilling in his brain, the battering of colour smell upon colour sensation, warning him, urging him, demanding everything in him to turn back—now !

The sun sank in floods of blood and still they had found no welcoming island. They camped out in the wide grasses, husbanding their water and their strength. Only later did the realisation come to them that marching was better at night, that then the cruel sun did not suck the moisture from their bodies at every movement. They had, they reckoned, water enough for four days. After that, if they did not find fresh supplies, they would all die of thirst.

The prospect put a frenzy into them. They marched all the next night and slept, exhausted during the day under rough canopies of their scraps of cloth. The next night and the next passed, they covered ground—and still found no water. The grasses, rustling in the dryness, mocked them with the knowledge that their water lay far down, absorbed by the earth in the rainy season, untappable by man. They stumbled on, faces burning, throats parched, lips cracked, determined not to give in to an alien planet.

Their tongues swelled. They kept an iron grip on their will power and reserved the dregs of remaining water during the long day of torture under the sun. They lay as still as possible, knowing that water drunk now would be wasted. That night they finished the last of the water and set off, following the guiding stars, heading still straight on across the featureless plain. They felt drawn on by some destiny they could not explain, and impelled by some force that would not let them lie down to sleep—and death.

Towards morning, when the false dawn began to brighten the sky, Justin thought he heard bird calls. His colours had deserted him. Numbed, his tired brain told him nothing of what lay ahead. He plodded on. Again he thought he heard a bird call, shrill and sweet in the lightening darkness.

He paused. Ed, walking with head slumped, collided with him, and was too weak and chalky-throated to curse.

Hurwitz collapsed. He lay on the dust beneath the waving grass and curled up and the others, feeling him, knew he was prepared to die. Justin swallowed painfully.

He pointed upwards. He cupped an ear.

Ed, moving in a daze, listened.

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Again, faintly, far-off, like the call of the muezzin floating from some fabled minaret far across the deserts, came once more that distant bird cry. Ed nodded his head. Justin knew that had there been enough free moisture in their bodies, tears would have been coursing down their leathery cheeks.

He pointed to Hurwitz and Ed shook his head. They could not carry him. Justin now had to make up his mind. He could go on aimlessly in hope of finding the island from which the birds called, leaving his comrades and returning to them with water, or he could wait until the dawn, and aim directly at his goal. He felt weak and trembling. If he sat down he doubted if he would rise again. Already the false dawn was dying in streaks of weakening fire.

The bird call came nearer. Standing straight up, he peared about. A dark shadow flitted, suddenly, past his vision. The shape swung wide-winged about his head. Some voyaging bird, lost perhaps, seeking the black shapes of the men as friendly trees in which to rest. The dust struck cold to his fingers. He scrabbled up a stone.

The throw took every ounce of will power inhim ; mere muscle power counted for nothing. The stone flew. The bird shrieked a wild cry, and fell.

And then there was only the quick flash of the knife and the warm blood and blessed liquid easing his throat and lips. Ed and he forced some of the liquid down Hurwitz. The Aristo moaned, flinging his arms about weakly. The bird was soon dry. But the interval had given Justin renewed strength. He managed to form words, croaking them out with pain and difficulty.

" Stay with him, Ed. I'll—be back."

Then he stumbled on, moving ahead, his body on fire and his brain a cauldron of liquid metal.

As the light strengthened he peered ahead, searching for the familiar shape of an island rising above the sea of grass. He could see nothing. He moved on still, forcing his way between the stems. Still nothing. He could see the horizon now, all about, straight and featureless and unbroken. In all that wide expanse no swelling, no rise, no island broke the level line. Under the rising, cruel sun, Julian Justin stared about and knew that he had reached the end of the road.

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ten

" Every principle of sociology and economics rests on the three sides of industry—Capital, Labour and the Pool." Binyon Porteus was holding forth on the steps of the Stock Exchange under the crystal-plastic canopy. His full-fleshed face and protuberant blue eyes commanded instant respect, and the magnificence of his clothes and personal adornments in the height of Aristo fashion showed quite plainly that he possessed the wealth and social standing to enforce that respect. His personal followers listened respectfully, as did those of the passers by who stopped to join the group on their various ways into and from the Exchange.

One of these casual strollers, Young Eli Skardon, paused and leaned negligently against a fluted pillar of moonstone. He drew his cloak elegantly over the flaregun holstered at his belt. He spoke contemptuously, addressing his office manager.

" Old Porteus is spouting again, Kozlov. The man should be stuffed and put in a museum and labelled : ' Extinct.' "

Kozlov, dutifully, laughed. He was a wispy, sparrow-like creature who had never been inside a Pool in his life, who believed implicitly the wildest stories current about them and who had a horror of unemployment that, whilst wholly irrational, was a terrible weapon wielded by his employer.

Now he leaned closer and whispered. " Do you think it wise, sir, to be seen here, now ?"

It was young Eli's turn to laugh. " I have business on 'change. Isn't it natural I should pause awhile to listen to the pearls of wisdom from the lips of the head of Porteus Industries ?" The remark amused him and he laughed again.

Kozlov wilted. He stared about, from the shadow of the pillar, from eyes that were wide with expectant dread.

He motioned to Young Eli's followers to close up, yet inconspicuously. They waited in the shadows ; young men, quick, hard, impatient, their greatest boast the speed of their draw.

What happened with indecent speed—the incident was over before those on the fringes of the crowd knew that anything at all had happened. The sound of the flaregun was like that of tough cloth ripped by a knife. There was very little blood—and that was crisped into the pavement.

Binyon Porteus stood for a long moment, his protuberant eyes shocked, incredulous, his handless arms wrapped about

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the nothingness that was his middle. When he fell, he fell like an old man, weak and fragile and with no resilience left.

It was doubtful if anyone even saw the assassin, either on his run in on target, during the despatch, or when he left. He must have been a good man, a member of a first-class Guild. And with one of those, you never did see them.

" See the cheque for the balance is paid into the Guild Bank, Kozlov," Young Eli said, and flung his cloak about him and strode into 'change.

He had no time to wait at the long counter where living men stood checking in member's hand weapons. Young Eli unbuckled his flaregun and slid it across the plastic counter. To it he added his personal dagger. Reckless though he was, and contemptuous of tradition and custom, he was not fool enough to chance going into the Stock Exchange armed.

Kozlov and the young men added their own weapons and Kozlov took the checks.

They went through into the wide, cool, vaulted room in a bunch. The aisles were full of machinery and men and women clerks. Robots scurried with refreshments. The cybernetic computers buried to the depth of a full mile beneath this building sent up their unending information and the screens covering the walls maintained a bewildering flow of colours and numbers and diagrams. Bewildering, that is, to one not an Aristo, used to balancing, and to whom this atmosphere was life.

On those walls, the centre of the Terran Technocratic Empire as the Solar Government building could never be, was displayed every detail of information on the shifting business trends of the public companies, the state of the economy on far-flung planets, shipping figures and rates, every variety of information an Aristo might need. Men said that if a native miner fell down and broke his pick and lantern on some fusty rim planet, the Stock Exchange walls would mirror that fact.

What the walls did not, and never would, mirror were any trends, any prognostications for the future. Everything the cybernetic machinery buried below dealt with was fact.

The machines recorded the present, which was immediately the past.

Only men—and balancing Aristos at that—looked to the future.

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Young Eli chuckled elegantly to himself. He had not only looked to the future ; he had shaped, delicately, that future to suit himself. Kozlov's assistants had already been at their work. The right moment for the news, the right moment to strike, and Young Eli was not only richer by a cool billion or so, he was master holder in Porteus Industries. A take-over bid, a raid, was not necessarily a matter of long negotiation and careful plans—with a Guild of Assassins to call upon in a business capacity.

Two men passed him, followed by their retainers, and he saw them to be men of substance, respected Aristos of, as he would express it, the old school. Their faces angry.

" Damn disgrace ! Old Porteus never did anyone any harm in his life . . ."

" On the steps of 'change. Indecent. Be having the guns in here next—"

" Never ! Poor old Binyon was careless. Must have been. Wouldn't like to be his captain of bodyguards when his wife talks to him—"

Young Eli fingered his beltless waist where his flaregun would have been, and smiled. Young, reckless, impious, he might be. But he could recognise decay and obsolescence when he saw and smelled it.

There was a wind blowing among the stars, a young wind, a wild wind, and in its beckoning onrush Young Eli saw the collapse of the old order and the emergence of a new and changed superior order and he had determined, with all the sudden strength in him, that the new order would be to his fashioning and to his advantage. For of what use is it to tear down the old if what is replaced is no better than that which has gone ? For fallen glories and old triumphs, Young Eli had only impatience and no understanding ; for him all that mattered was the victory of tomorrow and the triumph that led him on to fresh glories and brighter repute.

He saw his father and his uncle Harold approaching and groaned. Now that they had seen him it was too late to avoid them, nor would it have been politic ; the politeness of the matter did not enter his head. He put on a smile.

After cordialities had been gone through and the terrible news of poor old Binyon Porteous had been discussed with suitable expressions of regret, Young Eli exercised his skill in

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evading casual but nonetheless searching questions as to the benefactors of the assassination.

" Apart from the Guild, who did the job, I wouldn't know," he said lightly.

Harold Skardon froze at the flippant tone in his nephew; but out of consideration for the boy's father, his brother Louis, he did not reprimand him. Youth would be served, he supposed, and broke into the topic that most consumed him.

" Have you any news of Paul Hurwitz ? He hasn't been seen around lately and I'm worried—well, intrigued, shall we say."

" You may say what you like, uncle. Your interest in the whereabouts of Hurwitz is of no concern of mine."

Then Skardon remembered that Young Eli, too, wanted Estelle, just as did Hurwitz. Well. He would have to watch these two wildcats. In striking at each other they might harm him and his daughter and his Company. And that he would not permit.

" As for Hurwitz," went on Young Eli. " The last I heard he was prospecting some new world, hunting concessions. I did hear that the CC hadn't even finished with the place yet—"

" Paul runs his own construction company, Eli, and no doubt was investigating the possibility of handling a sub-contract from the government. Even the Government Construction Crews with their forced labour cannot terraform every new planet."

" Maybe. The work seems beneath an Aristo, to me. Apart from that, I know nothing."

" If you hear from him, or of him, I would be obliged if you would let me know. We have business to discuss."

" I'll do that, uncle. Now, father, can I persuade you to discuss business with me ? I have a scheme in which Gorgon Industries should pull down a cool couple of billion. What we have to do first is—"

" What we have to do first," Louis Skardon told his son, " is to find out what your grandfather, old Eli, thinks about it. After that, we can go ahead."

Young Eli composed his face. He swirled his cloak around him. " The dead hand," he said. " The dead hand of tradition and the constitution and all the trappings of entrenched power. It's high time Old Eli handed over the reins of power."

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Even whilst, this time, Skardon reproved his nephew, he was thinking that the young whipper-snapper was right.

" At least," Louis said mildly. " Old Eli must have done something about the pressure on the family. Gorgon Industries is still affluent, still high in the 'change ratings list. Whatever Company was attacking us has eased up."

" Negative virtues," Young Eli said. He flared his cloak as he spoke and, critically, Skardon recognised the movement as an affectation that was growing into a habit and would in a few years be unbreakable.

" Maybe fighting for your own family and family pride is a negative thing, Young Eli," he said slowly. " But to me it has more virtue than arranging the assassination of someone like Binyon Porteus." He watched Eli.

Young Eli remained cool under the words and the scrutiny. He did not flare his cloak again. He was the model of any respectable young businessman, hanging adoringly on the words of his departmental superior, and thinking only of the good of the firm and his next raise. Skardon could not balance out the vague suspicions in his mind ; they were preposterous, anyway. Young Eli was still a youngster, with no capital and Company behind him—and, infuriatingly, the pressures might have been eased on Gorgon Industries ; but the hidden attacks still went on against Skardon Sales. He would have to act firmly but kindly against his father. He could wash out of his mind these nonsensical suspicions of Young Eli.

If Paul Hurwitz was not soon available then any other young and ambitious Aristo would suffice ; a man like Micon, for instance. There were plenty of youthful, restless Aristos anxiously thrusting for places in the big business sunshine. All they needed was a start in the right direction and a little protection for which at this early stage in their careers, they usually could not afford to pay. The death rate among Aristos was highest among those who were struggling up. The men already in commanding positions could afford the enormous sums for professional bodyguard protection. Yes, he would have to be gentle but kind with Old Eli. The old man must be dealt with.

And the quicker he found Paul Hurwitz, the quicker he could do something about it—his own way.

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eleven

One tree and one tree alone in all the world was there for the staring, bloodshot, dust-bedevilled eyes of Julian Justin to see. He lurched heavily forward and the slowness of his recovery shocked and frightened him. He knew of the five stages of thirst death and he realised with panic that he must be moving along that path of utter destruction, from which, no matter how much water he drank or was pumped into him, he could never recover.

The sun burned into his neck. The horizon line jumped and wavered as though he were watching it through the rippling veil of a waterfall. The idea tortured him. His swollen tongue crept out, rasping on his cracked lips.

One tree. Had there been a tree? A blackened, lecherous, skeleton form, grotesquely twisted against the sky?

His eyes burned as fiercely as the sun. He swung his head foolishly, seeking again the phantom outline of a tree.

There was a tree. A dead, blasted, hopeless, tree.

But there *was* a tree!

He reached it on his last gasp and fell forward beneath the gargoyle limbs and trunk; exhausted, spent, utterly beaten.

But he could not afford to be beaten, not now, not with Ed and Hurwitz back there, waiting for him to bring them water. Not with the plans they had discussed, the great things they were going to do in the system. He opened one eye. He fought the pain. He was lying on a mere pimple in the plain, a tiny upswelling that had supported this single tree. His face was thrust against the sere trunk and his feet trailed in the grasses of the plain. On an island in the sea, he would have been lying with his head on the highest point and his feet in the surf of the shore.

Laboriously he turned over. What hope was there here, on this mockery of an island, where no bushes grew, no juicy-stemmed plants from which the sharp-tasting liquid could be squeezed? Even the one tree of the island was dead.

Then, in his last stage of despair, he remembered what Hurwitz had said. That the plants of this world stored their water in other places than the stems and leaves. He recalled that tubers, too, contain water, and whilst there was still no hope kindled in him, whilst yet there was an avenue of hope unexplored, then he must go down it—with his eyes open and paining him like hell. He scrabbled around. Between a

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profusion of overblown grasses was a clear space where nothing grew save a tiny twig that rose fron the ground. On the twig were three small, bright green leaves.

That was all.

He couldn't believe his luck.

The twig was perhaps nine inches tall, as thick around as a pen and the three leaves were soldar sized. A tiny, fragile, wispy object to be his salvation.

The labour took time and sweat—what sweat there was left left in him—and much pain and gasping effort. He dug down around the twig, opening out a pit, and about eight inches down struck the hard round surface he was seeking. He had to widen the pit greatly. At last, with the black desire on him, he scraped away the last of the earth revealing the gross tuber buried there, a tuber as large across as a spacehelmet, covered by a tough greenish tegument spotted with yellow blotches.

Justin didn't bother to lift the giant root. He struck down with the knife and, forcing the blade into one of the yellowish patches and working it about, managed to slice off a segment. He lifted it up. It oozed. He thrust the damp flesh against his lips and sucked.

When this alien planet steadied down around him again he sliced off more portions and carefully covered up the tuber in its pit against the sun. With his water bottle full of water squeezed from the wrung-out flesh and with succulent sections wrapped in his pack, he turned about, hooked his thumb into his thumbstick and started off—back to Ed and Hurwitz.

Ed sat with his back propped comfortably against the blackened tree trunk, a pad of cloth giving added luxury, and stretched his long legs out before him, crossed, and picked delicately at the last of the bird's leg between greasy fingers. Hurwitz, still weak and dazed, lay on his bedroll, gazing in fascination at the cup of water that stood by his hand, ready to be picked up whenever he wished.

Justin looked at his two comrades and found it hard to realise that a month or so ago they had followed such different lives ; one an Aristo of the highest class, the others mere brown-clad slave labour of the government Construction Crews.

He sighed, and swilled a mouthful of water around, luxuriating in the sharp, refreshing tang of it. The giant tuber had yielded water to fill all their canteens and to spare, and they

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had decided to gather their strength here where wild birds were for the snaring, before pushing on.

It was during this interlude of peace between long punishing treks across the plain that they first put into order, or some semblance of order, the plans that subsequently appeared to them to be so obvious and easy of organisation. Ed's easy prattle of making money as soon as they hit Earth had brought the natural remark from Hurwitz that, if he did his duty, as soon as they reached civilisation he ought to hand them over to justice. He added, casually, reaching for the water, that, of course, they needn't think he would. Both Ed and Justin knew that, and they understood that it was not because they might decide to kill Hurwitz here and now ; but because the three of them now formed a team.

The bonds between them had been forged in an environment where comradeship meant life and petty self-seeking meant death. No one who had not experienced this naked struggle against a hostile environment could hope to understand that, Justin realised. The struggles for power in the Aristos' business world and the bitter fight for mere survival in the Pool could fit no man to understand this triple bond between them ; he must experience it himself at first hand.

And here Justin's vague ideas of some master scheme maturing in Hurwitz'a head were vindicated.

The Aristo began to talk to them of his own plans, his own desires. Ed sat up. Here was something beyond the mere making of money.

" But," Ed protested at one point. "That would mean that I'd have to wear a Company badge ! I couldn't soil myself like that."

" Well, now, Ed, hold it a minute," Julian said slowly. " I figured the greatest disgrace a man can bear is to wear a Company badge—but then, I look at things differently now, and maybe I've changed my mind. You grow up in the Pool with one set of ideas, and they are good for as long as you live in the Pool. Equally, the Company men must think they are right. When you get a sort of, well, a synthesis of these views—"

Hurwitz interrupted. " What it boils down to is that if we are to make our reputations, if we are to grasp the opportunities we have, make money, control men and organisations and exercise power—then we must think afresh—and think for ourselves. And by that, I really mean think for and of ourselves."

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His dark intense face overpowered them with the strength of his own vision. " Your scheme by which Julian gambled and had to win because his colours told him that if he lost, you Ed, would stick a great needle into him, well, that was a clever scheme. But I don't think you'd last long on 'change." Here Hurwitz paused, shifting uncomfortably, and then went on speaking. But Justin caught an odd suspicion that the Aristo had shied away from a subject of conversation that he could not bring himself to discuss. Justin decided to remember that and to probe for that area of censorship at a later date.

Hurwitz went on : " My Company is small at the moment. I plan, naturally, to expand. The biggest danger any individual has to face is assassination. The Guilds are well-organised and work strictly to the Law. I believe that there are some shady outfits that would do a job for you illegally—"

" There sure are !" Ed said angrily. " My old grannie had a terrible fright once. Seems one of her old boy-friends didn't like the sight of my grandad and arranged to have him knocked off. He used one of these stinking little assassin outfits that'd do anything for a soldar.. They sent a man who must have been kicked out of a legal guild—"

" How come you're here, then, Ed ?" asked Hurwitz.

Ed laughed. " My old grandad was a crusher-of-bones. He picked this fellow up and wrapped him around a monorail pillar. And the old boy-friend tried to get his money back from the assassins !"

" Well, he was entitled to it. The law says—"

" Sure. But when he went to the office, they'd gone, vamoosed, pulled out. My old grannie caught up with him and just about tweaked all his teeth out. She married my grandad just after that. If you know the right addresses you can have any job at all, anything at all, and they'll cloak it under the excuse of an assassins' guild. The flics don't like it, and they tend to frown on any private assassin."

Oddly, in that moment, Justin thought of Raphe Bartram and wondered if his oldest friend had managed to enter an accredited assassins' guild or was working for some sleezy dump in the Pool like Rafferty's. At least, he was surrounded by brick and concrete and plastic, not marooned in a sea of grass under an alien sun.

" All this proves," Hurwitz said, after they had finished laughing at Ed's anecdotes about his old grannie, " is that we

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have to have the protection that Julian can give us. With my Company as a jumping off point, with a strong programme and with virtual immunity afforded by Julian, we can take over company after company and create the biggest industrial complex the galaxy has ever seen."

"Wow," said Ed.

"But," said Justin, "how can my colours protect you and Ed, Paul, when they warn only me?"

"Ah!" said Hurwitz, chuckling. He took another sip of water. Above their heads, now, the stars were slipping out, sprinkling this alien sky, and all about the rustling of the grasses sounded like distant surf upon a tropic shore.

"All right for you to go 'Ah!' Paul," grumbled Ed. "How is it to be worked?"

Hurwitz was relishing this moment. "This is a historic point of time; the nodal point. Here we decide the fate of more men and money and races than we even dream exist. We change the fate of the galaxy, tonight, here as we sit talking on a tiny island in an ocean of grass."

Justin smiled uncomfortably. The heightened sense of oneness they shared made him see clearly that what Hurwitz said was nothing less than the truth. What he was anxious to find out was how they intended to implement this grandiose plan to take over the industry, commerce, banking and ultimate power of the galaxy. Lying on his back with a warm wind ruffling his long hair and beard, staring up into the purple sky and the huge, coloured stars, hearing the eternal whisper of the grasses all about, he felt a kinship with these other two as he knew they felt with him, and he became absolutely certain that they could do everything that Hurwitz had prophesised.

"But how, Paul? he said. "How?"

Hurwitz did not answer but stood up, black against the purple sky, and walked the short distance to the edge of the island. He and the dead tree stood out against the stars. Ed and Justin did not say anything. They waited, knowing that their friend was working something out that had, on the face of it, nothing to do with the question Justin had just asked.

The Aristo turned. They could not see his face; but his voice told them he was labouring under extreme tension. Yet he spoke almost matter-of-factly, lightly, as though to speak as he felt would have unleashed a flood tide that he could not control. "We three are bound together as comrades in arms. We have suffered together. I accepted equal responsibility with

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you for the crash when I neglected to act as I should have acted the moment you showed yourselves. I think you know that, even then, I knew we could be useful to one another, although, to be truthful, I suppose then I felt that you could be useful to me."

The others remained quiet under the night wind and the stars.

"As soon as you gave your warning, Julian, I could have done a number of different things. The course I followed, which resulted in the unfortunate death of Arthur, was the one I considered on balance best. And, of course, I was right. The fiddler mechanism on the cyber brain ensured that the space-field control tower would continue to think I was on course and heading out. They don't even know we crashed and so no search could ever have been instigated. When we walk in, a little quick talk will be necessary ; but they still won't really understand what happened. That's a fiddler mech for you."

"Devilish," Ed said, and would have gone on talking ; but Justin laid a hand on his arm and the voluble man shut up.

"Well, that's all in the past, as far as our plans are concerned. I need you two to fulfil our schemes. You need me for—for the peculiar ability possessed by Aristos. I am betraying the gravest secrets known to my class when I deal as equals with you . . . Yet we are all three men. I have no desire whatsoever to hurt you, Ed ; but you are a man. Julian is a little more than a man through the gift of his colours. And I—I am an Aristo."

Ed shifted and would have uttered in speech what he was muttering to himself ; but the grip on his arm contracted and he subsided.

"I do not think," Julian said steadily, "that my colour sense makes me a better man than a man without. What is it that makes you Aristos so much better than us ?"

There was danger here. The threads that held these three men—or more than men—together were being subjected to their first strains. The comradeship and oneness that bound them in the ocean of grass might not last among the concrete and plastic and class boundaries of the real world. Justin, sincerely, hoped that those bonds would hold. He would feel a distinct sense of loss if Hurwitz turned back into a sneering, lordly and contemptuous Aristo.

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" First of all," Hurwitz said, walking back to them and sitting down. " We are three individuals who are working as a team. I shall not forget, Julian, that you saved my life. And Ed, too, has contributed, as have I, to our joint well being. With that understood, I am confident that we can, as soon as we get back to civilisation, start our operations and clean up. Agreed ?"

" Agreed."

" The business end you can entrust to me, and I shall, Ed, see to it that your ideas are fully explored. But, later on, you will understand why those ideas may not be quite as you imagine them to be today. This, I promise, I will explain. You, Julian, have the task of ensuring that our combine is not overturned by the assassins."

" How ?"

" You believed, did you not, that Ed would thrust that needle into you if you lost at the gambling games ?"

" He flaming well did ! And it hurt—"

" When we are forging ahead with our schemes, and I am arranging various raids and takeovers, other Company directors may decide to eliminate me. That is the peril that any man who strives for complete authority must face—"

" But bodyguards—"

" Are fallible." Hurwitz spoke now with simple sincerity. " If I am assassinated, all our schemes will be frustrated. So, Ed, if I am killed in this way, then you must swear that at once you will in turn kill Julian !"

" What—!" said Ed.

" I—see !" said Justin. Then : " It would work ! By thunder, it would work. Complete protection for us all, as we take over the galaxy !"

twelve

The Lady Estelle Skardon wept at her grandfather's funeral. She stood with the other mourners in the tower of the space-field, elegantly clad in black nylon and wearing a black face veil that dangerously enhanced the pale beauty of her face. Across the field the black-swathed launching ramp was being cleared of technicians who had checked over old Eli's private space yacht and the gaunt latticework with its sombre dressings looked somehow fragile and yet sinewed with strength, just as old Eli himself had been in life.

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Harold Skardon stood beside Estelle. At his other side stood his brother Louis, silent and tense, flanked by his son Young Eli. Young Eli wore his black mourning clothes with a panache that, in an old-fashioned and sentimental way, was out of keeping, was unseemly, at this time of family sorrow.

"Poor father," Skardon said, to himself, the words not stirring a millimeter of air. "With all my scheming quite ineffective against that granite-like quality in him, he died just like an ordinary man." Old Eli had, in the rashness of old age, been stricken away from his doctors and geriatrists ; a sudden attack had caught him and, before the artificial heart and lungs could be rushed to him he had died and in his dying had gone beyond the point at which a man could safely be revived. He could have been brought back to life ; but his brain cells had been injured beyond redress and he could have been, at best, merely a gibbering wreck of a man. In all mercy, nature had been allowed to win, and Grim Old Eli Skardon had been laid reverently to rest.

Typical of the old man had been his insistence on an archaic form of interment. When he had been a young man the fashion in burials had been to send the corpse off in its own spaceship, to circle endlessly in space or to fall at last into some blazing star as the hand of fate might ordain, and this mode of burial had been that commanded by old Eli in his will. Thinking of the will reminded Skardon that after all the refusal of Paul Hurwitz to act for him as he had desired when at last the man had been found had not affected the issue. Micon, a bustling young Aristo, had done all that Skardon had ordered, to no avail. Old Eli had clung to his position and his assets with the tenacity of the stubborn aged Aristo he was. Death—and a natural death—had been solely the means whereby Skardon and his brother Louis now found themselves governing the entire complex of Gorgon Industries.

Skardon repressed a little shiver. Coincident with the death of old Eli the gnawing pressures on Skardon Sales, which he had been combating in the dark for so long, had ceased. He tried to tell himself that it was merely a coincidence. How could, he had argued long and fretfully, old Eli have taken active measures against his own son, against his own subsidiary company? It didn't make sense. And yet that mysterious threat had stopped at the same time old Eli had died.

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Estelle wiped her eyes under the veil, and Skardon glanced down uneasily at her. She had always been impressionable, had always been an emotional girl, yet he could not help feeling that her grief—a very real grief—now for her grandfather was a sign of imbalance. Maybe she wasn't as firmly anchored to reality as the rest of the Aristo class. Her dabbling in archaeology he had laughed off as a childish whim, something to be outgrown. But she was now approaching her twentieth birthday and her interest in digging about in the dust of ages was as strong as it had been when she had gone off on that first dig to Rome when she was fifteen. Thinking of that reminded him again of the first time he had been attacked in this subtle threat on his company, and of his then conviction that there had been two would-be assassins. Lately, before they had ceased, the attacks had been purely on the business level ; there had been no more threats to his life and Louis had also reported none.

Could the hidden hand of death have been ordered by old Eli ? He still didn't think it could be possible ; but he had been reared to face facts.

The activity in the spaceport claimed his attention now and he remembered that he came to this place to bury his father. He composed his face. Estelle snuffled. He looked down on her again, and spoke gently.

" There is an important interstellar business conference on Mytilene—that's in towards the galactic hub—coming up next week, Estelle. How'd you like to go along with me ?" He added quickly : " Mytilene is a pleasure world, of course. You wouldn't need to attend the Aristo business sessions. Just spend your time enjoying "—Skardon checked himself, then went on cunningly—" the planet. Mytilene is a very old world with traces of a previous civilisation. You'd find plenty to do."

" To occupy my mind, you mean, father," Estelle said listlessly. She touched his arm affectionately. " All right. I'll go with you. You need a holiday, too, you know."

" Too much to do," Skardon answered automatically. It was his stock answer to the remark. Out on the field the warning lights and hooters were, in a subdued tone, warning of the impending takeoff. Skardon turned to his nephew.

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" Perhaps, Young Eli, you'd care to come along too ?" There was a half-formed idea in Skardon's brain that Young Eli would provide an escort he could trust, now that Paul Hurwitz had blotted his copy book. Or had he ? Skardon could not make up his mind about Hurwitz, and the strangeness of that situation both infuriated and intrigued him. He'd seen the man just once since his return to life from some Godforsaken planet—and the change in him had been startling.

Now, Young Eli's response to his invitation was as startling.

" Uncle Harold. Please remember that I am no longer Young Eli. Grandfather is dead. I am the only Eli in the family. So how can I be Young Eli ? Please do not forget it. My name is Eli Skardon."

Skardon checked his abrupt movement, and swallowed and compressed his lips ; but he managed to nod his head in acquiescence. He chuckled inwardly, letting the humour of the situation smother his indignation. Young Eli—rather, Eli—was quite right, of course. Time was passing.

Louis said : " Don't be so impatient, Eli. Your Grandfather isn't buried yet."

" Any minute now," Eli said, indicating the launching ramp.

The warning lights were now burning steadily. The control tower officer received the signal from the minister who had conducted the service aboard Old Eli's space yacht. Now they had only to wait.

" Well, Eli," Estelle said, tossing her head. " You haven't said if you're coming to Mytilene with me or not."

" I much fear I shall be unable to go," Eli said smoothly. " There is a great deal to do. Holidays are not for a hard-working Aristo."

" I'm sure I shan't miss you, then," Estelle said. Her eyes were fixed on the launching ramp through the windows and she had forgotten to keep on crying.

" Harrumph," said Skardon.

" And you needn't think I shall call you Eli," Estelle went on in a spirited fashion. " You haven't really grown up yet and—"

" Oh, do shut up, Estelle !" Eli said, and turned his back.

Estelle's cheeks flamed. Then she flounced around and had to look over her shoulder if she wanted to watch the takeoff.

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Skardon, hiding his smile, began to think that perhaps first cousins' marriages were by no means out of date.

" If you decide to call on us on Mytilene," he said. " I'm sure we can find some business to mix with the pleasure."

Then the noise of tons of air being ripped apart as the ship's drivers forced her upwards off the launching ramp drowned every other sound. The tower windows had been left open. The pale gleam of sunshine shafted down, glancing from polished plastic. There was the wet, heavy moisture smell in the air, and everything for a few moments trembled.

Then the spaceyacht had gone, winked out into hyper-drive and tearing through sub-space on her last journey.

And the body of Grim Old Eli Skardon was carried out into the vasty deeps for the last time.

Mytilene was the playground of Big Business.

Men said, with a shrug and a wink, that anything you ever wanted or could imagine desiring, that thing could be found on one of the spinning worldlets of Mytilene. There was colour here, vivacity, the sparkle of bubbling wine and the feathery laughter of women, jewels, fine clothes, expensive toys and dishes to satisfy the veriest expert in epicureanism. The other side, the seamy side of robotic servants and steaming kitchens and factories and amusement manufacture was kept, on Mytilene, discreetly and efficiently hidden. No sour note was allowed to jar the pleasures of tired business men from all over the Galaxy.

To Estelle Skardon, the coloured worldlets of Mytilene were like the spinning tops of her childhood, playthings for her amusement and delight.

She revelled in the luxury and opulence. The science of man revealed through the beneficent hand of the great Companies and Monopolies had gathered many small planetoids, coralled them in a magic web of electro-magnetism and set them spinning within a vast and misty globe of pure Earthly air. Standing on the surface on some marble and crystal balcony, you had only to summon your personal flier and flit from planetoid to planetoid as the fancy took you—and the whole journey could be carried out with, as it were, the hood down.

The science of man had taken twelve stars and set them dancing, had joined them in a daisy chain of sparkling brilliance and variegated colour, and flung them like a wedding

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band around the planetoid-speckled ball of air that was Mytilene. In his might and power man had changed the order of nature, so that twelve suns rotated in precise order about a globe of air within which spun many small planets. A topsy-turvy world. A world forever day, a day of changing light and radiance, a day measured in terms of colour, so that a man would say ; ' I'll meet you in the second hour of Citron,' or : ' The bill of credit falls due at the end of Cherry.'

A world to enchant—rather, worlds to enchant—any young and impressionable girl.

Their private space yacht having deposited the Skardon retinue safely on the planetoid hotel of their choice, Skardon dealt competently with immediate problems, saw to it that Estelle would have the discreet protection of a Shield Bearer operative, and then plunged himself into the details of the business conference which would, he hoped, finish to some advantage to himself and Gorgon Industries. He had had the suspicion of the past few weeks almost certainly translated into fact by the latest news his office manager had passed to him in transit to Mytilene. Someone was attempting to pressure Gorgon. Shareholders had reported casually made offers at prices above par. Skardon refused to worry ; but he felt a bloating sense of anger at this new threat to his new empire. He went into the conference chamber like a bear entering the pit ; Estelle, laughing and carefree, entered the delights of Mytilene like a butterfly sampling flowerdew.

She had changed into a single-piece bathing costume, hidden an elegantly designed anti-grav pack about her slim person, and had gone bowl-flying. And the first person she saw as she sailed among artificial clouds, kept at a steady temperature by the machines buried below, was Paul Hurwitz.

Her first reaction was one of pique. Hurwitz had made no attempt to contact her since his amazing return from the dead, and so now, with justifiable feminine logic, she decided not to see him and not to be recognised. It was up to him to chase after her, not the other and so unladylike way about. On the spot she changed her name to Estelle Freeman, relishing the connotations in the name, and withdrew from the bowl.

A short hop in her personal flier, with a shadow in her rear-plate which must be the tiresome Shield-Bearer bodyguard, took her to an adjacent planetoid. Flying through the air from

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planet to planet was a weird and exhiliarating experience, no matter how many times the blase traveller hopped from world to world. She was breathless and laughing and a little above herself when she stepped from her flier and plunged again into a bowl, filled with clouds and birds, scents and music ; but in almost no time at all she was floating dreamily along, lost in the magic of the dream that the bowls existed to provide to all who cared to eat of their scientific lotus-blossoms.

Then she saw a man plunge down from a cloud. Something strange happened to Estelle then. Her throat and chest tightened and something within her struggled to break free. She stared, with her mouth and her eyes open, forgetting her ladylike manners and poise. She had never felt these sensations in her life before. She wondered if she might be ill ; and knew she was not. The stranger smiled, and at once she decided to punish him.

To be concluded

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Hard Cover—British.

Not all of the science fiction books now being published are presented for a review in these pages—an omission on the part of the relevant publishers I find hard to understand. After all I am no Robert Muller, and in any case I should have thought that any mention in a small but specialized medium such as a science-fiction magazine would have at least as much value as a miniscule and possibly patronising piece in a national newspaper. Moreover, if publishers, wishing to immunize their books against the 'kiss-of-death' label of science-fiction, decry even this publicity, let them be assured that our readers are looking for just this type of reading, and wish to be told what new titles are available.

An exception is Victor Gollancz Ltd., whose **The Dragon in the Sea** by Frank Herbert (13/6d) has its familiar yellow dust-jacket emblazoned unashamedly with the description 'science-fiction.' And justifiably, too. Originally a serial in *Astounding* as " Undersea Pressure," this is to my mind one of the few great s-f novels of recent years. The story concerns one brilliantly conceived facet of a future world wherein the East-West blocs are still locked in combat despite atomic devastation, and the conflict is being bolstered up by desperate co-ordination of scientific invention and economic rationing, particularly in oil. (It is interesting to note that very few s-f. authors take into account the rapidly depleting stock of global oil deposits when depicting future technocracies). The U.S. has reached a stage where it is reliant for survival on a new supply pirated from beneath enemy territory, looted by atomic submarines and transported in giant undersea balloon barges. Sabotage has negated the success of the last score of raiding expeditions, and this book is the story of the final desperate and dangerous attempt to uncover the saboteurs'

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methods and regain the oil supply. The story of the four-man crew of the giant submarine, one of whom is a planted security agent and one is an enemy agent. The author has fleshed this skeleton of a plot with deeply insighted characterization, clashing human temperaments, heroics and humour, and above all a superlative visual realism of life in the technical wonders of the undersea vessel. Unhesitatingly recommended.

The only other novel is youth-slanted, being in fact the third space adventure of our likeable hero Chris Godfrey—**Operation Columbus** by Hugh Walters (Faber and Faber, 13/6d). Excellent plotting and straightforward style tend to overcome the somewhat naive simplicity for older readers, and of course Arthur C. Clarke has done it all before and so much better. Even so, far superior to the usual run of juvenile s-f in England.

Concurrently for technically minded youngsters, what better in the non-fiction field than **The True Book About Space Travel** (Fredk. Muller, 8/6d) by Kenneth Johns, well-known to *New Worlds* readers for his excellent series of scientific articles. Ably illustrated by Arthur Thompson, it lucidly and graphically describes mankind's attempts to beat the space barrier.

Lastly a book which, as far as I know, is the first of its kind to be published. Its title is **Aspects of Science Fiction,** the author G. D. Doherty, B.A. a Senior English Master at a Manchester Grammar School, and it is published by John Murray in their "Albemarle Library for Schools." And before I go any further let me say that I know of at least one secondary school in London where this book is now part of the curriculum. So much for the disrepute of science-fiction. And—bearing in mind his own scholarly approach to the subject and the attitude of the schoolchildren to the genre being inculcated in their minds as part of the field of English literature (if this were ever needed)—what a wonderful job Mr. Doherty has made of this school primer. A succinct introductory outline, a categorised selection of short stories by such representative authors as Bradbury, Clarke, Aldiss, Van Vogt, Wells, etc., a glossary of SF terms, a guide to further reading (unassailable if not comprehensive) and of course the Exercises, each a handful of questions and writing labours based on each story. And to think that when I was at school I had surreptitiously to read the old Clayton *Astoundings* well concealed behind my Latin textbook !

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Paperbacks—British.

The output of s-f and fantasy paperbacks continues unabated, mainly from publishers like Digit, Corgi, etc., but now augmented by a few direct importations from the U.S.A., in particular some very good titles from Ballantine. However, only those titles sent in for review will get a mention I am afraid (publishers please note) and just received are three from Digit and two from Corgi. The Digits at 2/- represent very good value, especially when a Van Vogt is offered—**The House That Stood Still,** a good blend of s-f and suspense, Van Vogt's superman theme this time involving a group of immortals. Also from America is **The Macabre Reader,** edited by Don Wollheim, a familiar cauldron of gothic grue and ghoulish ghastliness, mostly from the old *Weird Tales* era, by such eminent names in the genre as Lovecraft, Howard, Bloch and Clark Ashton Smith. Thirdly, **Voices in the Dark** by Edmund Cooper of which I had read about 40 pages wondering what this ' novel ' was all about when I suddenly realised that it was a short story collection ! There is simply no indication on either cover or title page, and knowing Cooper's diversified style, I fell into the innocent trap and read with pleasant mystification what I had taken for three subdivisions of chapter one—dealing with separate and distinct childhood episodes, each delightful gems of fantasy. It *could* have been the beginning of an unusual novel . . . but once the penny had dropped I started again and found that the author had taken five different themes and developed each into three separate short stories. " The Voice of Innocence," as I have said, covers childhood fantasies ; " Laughter Below " is tongue-in-cheek, but with the discomfort of borrowed similarity (i.e. " Nineteen Ninety Four " is suspiciously like Pohl's " The Midas Plague," and " The Mouse That Roared " even uses Leonard Wibberley's own title ; the third theme " The Voice of Love " is on safer ground with the tender moods of lovers ; " Impossible Echoes " covers a saucer invasion effecting universal peace (again derivative) and other symbolic s-f and lastly " The Fatal Voice " deals strangely with death. A satisfying, if not altogether original, collection, unclassifiably offbeat in style, but sound evidence that the short story in the fantasy genre can still have emotional impact in the hands of an able writer.

The two Corgis are reprints at 2/6d each, and are disappointing in as much as the stories were poor when originally

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published and have not improved with maturity. Max Ehrlich's **The Big Eye** just doesn't come off—a conspiracy to fake an earth-destroying collision in order to effect global peace—although conjectures along these lines are always interesting, if perhaps only wishful thinking. Curt Siodmak's **Donovan's Brain** is a pedestrian example of the mind control story, in style lamentably tied to its original dateline of nearly two decades ago.

Paperbacks—American.

Ballantine Books' latest contributions to the paperback market are a mixed and interesting bag. Heading up the list and leaning more towards fantasy than science fiction is " Sarban's " fine novel **The Sound of His Horn,** an " If the Nazis had won the war " theme which is at times ghoulishly gruesome. **Strange Relations,** a collection of five novelettes by Philip Jose Farmer, have all appeared in magazine form, but are worth reading (or re-reading) if only for the vividness of Farmer's writing.

An unusual departure for Balantine is to re-issue a title. They have made an exception with the fine Pohl/Kornbluth novel, **The Space Merchants** and are planning to re-issue other earlier classics on their list—Arthur Clarke's **Childhood's End** will be one.

Murray Leinster gets another novelette collection, this time from Berkley Books. **The Aliens** contains four reprints : " Anthropological Note," " Fugitive From Space," " Skif-Tree Planet," and " The Aliens," and one new story, "Things From the Sky."

Judith Merril, who does so well with her yearly **Best** collection for Dell Books, comes into her own at Pyramid with **Out of Bounds,** a collection of seven of her own shorter stories : " That only a Mother," " Peeping Tom," " The Lady Was a Tramp," " Whoever You Are," " Connection Completed," " Dead Centre," and " Death Cannot Wither." A nicely balanced selection which shows why Judith has such a discerning taste in stories she chooses for anthologising.

The latest two titles from Ace Books are something of a mixed bag (when you consider that four short novels are represented by them). D-437 contains **And Then the Town Took Off** by Richard Wilson and **The Sioux Spaceman** (ghastly

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title) by Andre Norton. The former appeared in our companion magazine *Science Fantasy* (No. 33) under the title of " Super City " and is a humorously satirical story about a large hunk of Ohio which suddenly defies gravity and becomes a roving island in the sky—to the consternation of various world governments. Of the Norton portion of the book the less said the better ; I have never been particularly keen on Miss Norton's s-f work although she writes some very competent juvenile space opera, but this one has a by-line which states " Redskin Raiders On The Galactic Rim . . ."

The later Ace (D-443) hits a much better average for back-to-back novels. **Bow Down To Nul** by our own Brian Aldiss will doubtless be recognised as the recent *New Worlds* serial " X For Exploitation." I did not find this anywhere near Brian's usual standard and doubtless the American reviewers will have some interesting remarks to contribute in view of the good notices he has received for his earlier works. Backing the Aldiss is **The Dark Destroyers** by Manly Wade Wellman, an expansion of a much shorter story which appeared in *Astounding* in 1938 under the title of " Nuisance Value." The original story was published during what has been termed the heyday of modern s-f (allegedly the ' sense of wonder ' age) and it is interesting to read the revised version in terms of comparison. Doubtless the sense of wonder is still there if you haven't read too much s-f or too many first-class s-f novels in recent years but somehow the spark was completely missing for me. It is a survival novel of the remains of humanity struggling against alien domination (" slimy ice-cold creatures " as the blurb has it) and the usual death-defying actions of the hero to save the world.

A much more realistic survival novel and one that needs little imagination to ' live ' is Alfred Coppel's **Dark December** (Gold Medal), recounting the after effects of an all-out two-year atomic holocaust and the hero's endeavours to return to his own home. His adventures on the long trek are as grim and gruelling as only devastated humanity can make them—but how tedious these post-atomic war stories are now becoming. Every other author from George R. Stewart and Philip Wylie through Nevil Shute and on down to Alfred Coppel seem to be using the theme to carry The Warning.

Leslie Flood

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Editorial—continued

If you read *Starship Troopers* from the viewpoint of the professional soldier most of the author's philosophies make uncommonly good sense. In the same sense that there won't be any armchair astronauts crewing the first manned satellites or spaceships. Those who are not physically as well as mentally fitted for arduous and tough jobs are left behind to do the desk work.

Whichever way you look at war—other than a mental disease of Mankind's—you will have to make up your own mind on Heinlein's approach to the theme if you have an opportunity of reading the book. Like many American reviewers who have analysed the literary worth of this particular novel as well as his many others, I believe that he is now such an accomplished writer that he can tackle any futuristic theme from *any* angle without necessarily believing explicitly in the angle from which he is writing.

Which is the hallmark of the master craftsman.

John Carnell

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